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ANATOLE FRANCE

THE DEGENERATION
OF A GREAT ARTIST

BY BARRY CERF



LINCOLN MAC VEAGH
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To
MY MOTHER

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The point of view assumed by the author of this volume is unusual in the United States and in England. It is, however, in general agreement with that of a considerable number of French critics, notably M. V. Giraud ("Anatole France," in *Les Maîtres de l'Heure*, 1914). To this essay of M. Giraud and to the work of M. G. Michaut (*Anatole France, Etude psychologique*, 1913), both of which were excellently reviewed by Mr. D. S. Blondheim in *Modern Philology* (1916), the author is much indebted. It is worthy of note that since 1914 the French attitude toward Anatole France has gradually changed. Young men of letters have turned aside from him. Some older writers even, who had been inclined previously to accept all his works, have, without renouncing their liberal religious and political principles, tended to recognise the essential rightness of the position taken by M. Giraud, M. Michaut, and others before the war.

The best extended treatment of Anatole France in English is that of Mr. A. L. Guérard in his *Five Masters of French Fiction*, 1916.

Acknowledgment is gratefully made to the patient helpfulness of many friends, without whose aid and encouragement this book would never have been written: to Mr. W. F. Giese and Mr. F. A. Manchester, in particular; and also to Mr. V. L. O. Chittick, Mr. F. Ernst, Mr. A. F. Scott, Mr. T. Stareley, and Mr. B. M. Woodbridge.

The sharpest appetites, the lowest indecencies, succeeded to my innocent amusements and effaced all remembrance of them. Despite the worthiest education, I must have had by nature a strong tendency to degenerate, for I degenerated very rapidly and without the slightest effort on my part; and never did a Caesar so precocious become so quickly Laridon.

Rousseau, *Confessions*.

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"O heavy lightness! Serious vanity!"

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BIOGRAPHICAL

RENAN once observed in regard to George Sand: "Her works are the echo of our century." It may be said with equal truth that the works of Anatole France are the illuminating reflection of the various movements, literary, social, political, which agitated his country for sixty momentous years—from 1860 to 1920.

On graduating from college, France drifted into the camp of the Parnassians, the ruling school of poets, and wrote neo-classic poems in their manner. Just before and after the war of 1870, like most of the young men of his generation, he made a religion of Science, and acknowledged Darwin, Taine, and Renan as its prophets. During the next decade the ardor of young Frenchmen cooled; and the Eighties were for Anatole France and for the men of his years a period of dilettanteism, Renan alone of the great triumvirate remaining their master.

In 1889 a new period began. Anatole France had been mildly skeptical and ironical in relation to all secular thought as well as in the matter of religion. In this year his warfare with the autocratic Brunetière commenced, and gradually, from now to the end of his life, he became more aggressively skeptical, more frankly irreligious, more acridly ironical. The Dreyfus Affair of 1897 merely rendered conspicuous—to France himself as well as to the rest of the world—a development which had been taking place in him and which was destined to continue. After 1897 he became militantly anti-clerical and socialistic. These last two steps, that of

1889 and that of 1897, correspond with the evolution of most of the Intellectuals of the day. Along with the great majority of the French people, France hated war and prayed for peace, even at the expense of the Lost Provinces. In 1914 he shared the heroic patriotism of his people; after 1918, and even before, like most of his fellow-countrymen, he counted the cost of war and determined that the horror must not be repeated.

1.

France's personal life was uneventful. Its milestones are his books. They are open for all to read, and they disclose the man—the entire man. Most of them are autobiographical, and reveal the mind, the spirit, the character of the author; and surely there is little more that need be known about a man of letters.

The chief incidents of his childhood and adolescence are familiar to all his readers, for he has recounted them himself again and again. His first important work, the *Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*, is in part autobiographical. So too is the *Désirs de Jean Servien* (1882). Three years later appears the *Livre de mon Ami*, which derives much of its interest from the fact that the small boy who is its hero is the author himself. At the age of fifty-five France gives to the world further light on his childhood in *Pierre Nozière*; at seventy-four he publishes the *Petit Pierre*, and at seventy-eight the *Vie en Fleur*. To a most unusual degree he was haunted by memories of his youth.

And yet his early years were not extraordinary, or rather would have been no more than ordinary to a boy of ordinary nature. "It does not seem possible to me to have a spirit that is altogether commonplace," he says, "if one has been

raised on the quais of Paris, opposite the Louvre and the Tuileries, near the Palais Mazarin, in front of that glorious river, the Seine, which flows between the towers, the turrets, and the spires of old Paris. There, from the Rue Guénégaud to the Rue du Bac, the shops of booksellers, of antiquarians, and of dealers in prints exhibit in profusion the most beautiful forms of art and the quaintest witnesses of the past. Every window, in its curious grace and its amusing disorder, is a seduction for the eyes and for the mind. The passer-by who knows how to see always carries some idea away from there as the bird flies off with a straw for its nest."

Anatole France was born on April 16, 1844, in an old house of the Quai Malaquais, on the Left Bank of the Seine, opposite the Louvre. In that region, for a long distance up and down the river, old books and antiques of various kinds were invitingly displayed for sale. And there he lived as a boy. If he did not have a commonplace childhood, and if he loved Paris, and this quarter of Paris especially, "with an enormous love" throughout his whole life, it was because he was a gifted loiterer, a passer-by who knew how to see.

His father, François Thibaut, was one of the booksellers of the quais. He was the last of the "conversational" booksellers (the *libraires à chaises*), the Goncourts say. He was more interested in reading books and chatting about them than in selling them, more disposed to welcome an intelligent buyer than a rich one. He was from Anjou. There his intimates called him "France," a provincial diminutive of François. He finally dropped the name Thibaut, and became known to all as "France" or "le père France." His name appears as "France" on his printed letter-heads. His son signed himself in his childhood "Anatole France" or "Anatole France-Thibaut" indifferently.

Father and son seem to have been united only by their

devotion to books. On several occasions Anatole France declares that he disagreed with his father on all matters of opinion. But, though in general his statements in regard to his youth may be credited, it is possible that he was exaggerating in this case. He had good reason to disclaim in his maturity the views maintained by his father in the endless political and philosophical discussions that took place when the older Thibaut was surrounded by the usual group of intelligent readers and talkers who haunt old bookshops. For the father of the author of *Thaïs* and future communist was a staunch Catholic and Royalist, proud of the fact that he had been a corporal in the body-guard of Charles X; and his associates were of the same persuasion.¹

It is quite probable that the spirit of contradiction which remained always a prominent trait in France's character was roused by the conversations which he heard in his father's shop, and started him on the path to anti-Catholicism and communism. Another family influence carried him in the same direction. His grandmother was of the *ancien régime*, of the age which preceded the great Revolution. "Grandmother," says France, "was frivolous; grandmother had moral ideas which were anything but austere; grandmother had no more piety than a bird. You ought to have seen the quizzical glance she darted at us, my mother and me, when we were starting off for church on Sunday. She used to smile at my mother's serious way of going at the affairs of this world and the next. She always readily forgave my faults, and I think she was capable of forgiving greater than mine. She was in the habit of saying about me: 'He will be quite a different fellow from his father.' She meant that I would dance my youth away and fall in love with every

¹ For the names of the elder France's associates, see Huard, *Anatole France et le Quai Malaquais*, 1924, 6-7, 32.

woman I saw. . . . She was of the eighteenth century, my grandmother."

It is not necessary, however, to appeal either to the spirit of opposition which his father stirred in him or to the subtle suggestion of his grandmother in order to account for the importance of the eighteenth century tradition in the life and works of Anatole France from the late Seventies to the time of his death: his nature and the current of the day are explanation enough.

It was neither his father nor his grandmother who guided him during his childhood. It was his mother. He seems to have really loved only two persons in all his long life, his mother and his daughter Suzanne; and even in the case of these two affections, if one may judge from the dangerously meagre information that is available, there is evident a remarkable lack of that giving of oneself which is the proof of love. He speaks of his mother frequently in his autobiographies, and always with great gratitude and tenderness. But his autobiographies relate his childhood as seen through rose-colored glasses and other distorting mediums. M. Brousseau prints a record of two different conversations during which France, with much impatience and some contempt, pictured the tyranny of his mother's devotion. On the first occasion France said: "She literally poisoned my life. She made me inconsistent and timid. It was through her fault that, accustomed up to my thirties to being tied to her apron strings, I hesitated to cross the bridge which separates adolescence from manhood. . . . Love brought the most honest woman in the world to commit acts of the most revolting indelicacy. . . . Until I was thirty-five, she never went to bed till I came home." In the course of the second conversation he said: "One evening when I was eighteen, I found myself possessor of two unbelievable treasures: a *louis* and

the key to the front door. I don't know why my parents were absent. That didn't happen often! To the time of my marriage my mother tucked me into bed every night. When she had kissed me and was carrying away the candle, I sometimes longed to strangle her. There is no more heavy tyranny than mother-love."

An air of probability surrounds these confessions of the aged master to his malicious young secretary; and the accent of truth rings in the expression of them. Madame Thibaut was doubtless the sweet, devoted mother of the *Livre de mon Ami*; she was also probably the implacable tyrant depicted in M. Brousson's *Anatole France en Pantoufles*.¹ The first portrait is more pleasant; but it seems likely that the second is more important in a study of the formation of France's character and of the effect of his character upon his works. His early life was clearly abnormal and unfortunate. He had no love for his father, who apparently ignored him and seems never at any time to have sympathized with his efforts either as a boy or as a man. His childhood, prolonged inordinately, was guided entirely by his romantic mother, who stamped deep in him two regrettable characteristics to which he was inclined by nature and which he did not outgrow: timidity and the lack of a sense of reality. If Anatole France never learned to face life squarely and

¹ The passages from M. Brousson's book throw some light on a paragraph of the *Petit Pierre*. "My mother," France says in the latter place, "was charming, with a fine, generous soul and an exacting character. . . . A maternal love pushed to the status of a passion gave her a gloomy character and injured her naturally good health. . . . Her tenderness for me reached such a pitch as to disturb her reason. . . . She would have preferred that I should not grow, so as to be able always to press me to her bosom. . . . Everything that brought me a little independence and a little liberty offended her. . . . She never punished me for my faults; but she reproached me with a voice so sorrowful that my heart was torn." When read together, these two versions of France's reaction to his mother's devotion are seen to be by no means contradictory.

boldly,—and whatever inadequacy there is in his work is traceable largely to this failure,—the source of his disability is to be found in his natural disposition and in his mother's over-zealous watchfulness. The imagination with which the one endowed him and which the other cultivated in him was the imagination of the child. This he preserved during his entire life. It is the source of a delicate inspiration, but its scope is not wide. "I was happy," he says, speaking of his boyhood; "a thousand things, at the same time familiar and mysterious, occupied my imagination;" and: "I have never needed, even in my earliest years, to possess things in order to enjoy them." Anatole France was destined to deal with the realities of ordinary mundane life, and needed a more careful training in the art of distinguishing that which is familiar and may be possessed from that which is mysterious and hence unattainable. Firmly implanted in him during his long childhood was the doctrine of the similarity in nature or even identity of familiar and mysterious, of that which may be possessed and that which may not be possessed. The result was an inability to discriminate fact and fancy. When the moment of disillusion came, and the facts of existence imperiously demanded recognition, France's youthful idealism, founded as it was on an unstable basis, collapsed—a consummation that was inevitable in a person of his self-indulgent temperament. Had he not dreamed away his childhood and youth, had he learned earlier that human beings are neither saints nor paladins, he might have been able to reconcile himself to the sad facts of life and the dreary mediocrity of mankind when the truth finally forced itself through his doting mother's guard.

Other causes, and more potent still, made of France a skeptic and finally a cynic in relation to divine and human virtues, but the tyranny of his mother's tenderness and his

boyhood dreaming were in large part responsible for the issue.

His mother told him all kinds of stories, legendary and religious, homely and sublime. She made the pots and the kettles live; she evoked the world of gnomes and fairies; she recalled the miracles of saints and martyrs. "Her amiable and earnest piety touched me greatly," says her son. "She used to read to me from the *Lives of the Saints*. I listened with delight, and my heart was filled with surprise and love." His aversion to his father's religion because it was the religion of a father whom he did not like, and his inclination toward his grandmother's eighteenth century skepticism, were without effect, at this time at least. He was entirely in the hands of his mother, and her religion was his. It was precisely the kind of religion to appeal to a sensitive boy. But it was precisely the kind of religion that fails most readily when a timid boy comes in contact with reality, for it was all sentiment, surprise, and joy. There was in it nothing stern and imperious. It induced him to play St. Simeon Stylites and St. Nicholas of Patras, and to become a hermit in the *Jardin des Plantes*, in order that just as his father had printed on his visiting cards "Laureate of the Academy of Medicine and Secretary of the Anthropological Society," so he might write under his name "Hermit and Saint of the Calendar." If he had played more with other boys, if he had not been so exclusively the companion of his mother, or if he had not been by nature unusually susceptible and sentimental, this naïve religious ardor might have passed normally into the less credulous faith of adolescence. But during his whole life France always passed from pole to pole, never taking up the mean position, and with him violent action invariably provoked violent reaction. Resentment at his mother's tyranny and the insufficiency of the type of religion

which she taught him worked together with the repellent influence of his father and the attractiveness of his grandmother to prepare the way for the all-embracing skepticism of his later years.

2

His antagonism to all the aims and ideals of the Collège Stanislas helped him along the same road. His parents sent him ¹ to this pious school in order that his education might keep him true to the principles which had been inculcated in him. He lived at home; he could never, he declares, have endured the constraints of the *internat*.

France, like Voltaire and Renan, acquired under the rigid discipline of his ecclesiastical instructors the intimate knowledge of theology and the dialectical force which, he says, are indispensable to one who is successfully to combat the Church. Firmin Piedagnel of the *Orme du Mail* is one of the numerous figures in the novels who, according to most critics, represent Anatole France himself. He is a student at the seminary. The clairvoyant Abbé Lantaigne "recognized in this boy a Guérault, a Renan; and the cold sweat of anguish stood out upon his brow. He was terrified lest in the nurture of such pupils he was training formidable enemies of the truth. He knew it was in the temple that the hammers were forged which shook the temple. He said very often: 'Such is the power of the theological discipline that it alone is capable of creating great heretics. An unbeliever who has not passed through our hands is without strength and without hands for the furtherance of evil. It is within our walls that every science is learned, even that of blasphemy.'"

¹ In 1853 he entered the Institution Sainte-Marie. In 1855 this school was absorbed by the Collège Stanislas. Huard, 17.

The Abbé Lantaigne was right—at least in the cases of Firmin Piedagnel and of Anatole France. But Firmin Piedagnel and Anatole France are one man. A religious education may lead to quite different results. Writing in 1885, before *Balthazar* and *Thaïs* had appeared, Jules Lemaître congratulated France on the kind of college in which he had had his early training: “It is in an ecclesiastical school that he [France] spent his childhood. There is great advantage in this, I think, for often the practise of piety in such a place makes the soul more gentle and tender. Purity is more likely to be retained there, at least for a considerable time, and (save in the case of some madmen or evil hearts) when, later, faith deserts you, you remain nevertheless capable of understanding it and loving it in others, and you are more equitable and more intelligent.” Anatole France was neither a *fou* nor a *mauvais cœur*, but he was intolerant of restraint, and hated prescription. It was certain, therefore, that he would see clearly sooner or later that religion was his declared enemy. His artistic temperament impelled him to seek the comradeship of aristocratic lovers of art and luxury, conservatives, preservers of tradition and of peace at all cost. If he deserted them finally, it was because they were allied to the Church; and the Church, the immemorial enemy of self-indulgence, restrained and prescribed.

At the Collège Stanislas Anatole France acquired the necessary equipment for his future assault on religion. He gained at the same time a sound classical education, either with the aid of his masters, or, as he likes to tell us, in spite of them.

He had always loved books and art. He loved books before he could read, and pictures before he could understand their meaning. At an age when other children think only of their toys, he was planning to write a history of France in

fifty volumes, "with all the details," from the time of the giant Teutobochus to the present. During his life at Stanislas he did not abandon his devotion to old Paris and to the ancient glories of France. On the day which was expected to bring his connection with the college to an end, it was strong within him. He was to take his baccalaureate examination. His mother had given him five francs for his luncheon. He bought a piece of bread and clambered up into the towers of Notre-Dame to eat it. "There," he says, "I reigned over Paris. The Seine flowed between roofs, domes, and spires, and you could see it in the blue distance till its silver thread disappeared among the green slopes of the hills. I had under my feet fifteen hundred years of crimes and miseries, an ample subject of meditation for my unformed, still awkward mind." The charm was great, the meditation long—and the boy arrived at the Sorbonne too late for his examination.

He loved to wander along the Seine, "walking on those quais where from the Palais Bourbon to Notre-Dame you hear the stones tell one of the most beautiful of human adventures, the history of ancient France and of modern France." "I was nurtured on the quais," he says, "where old books are mingled with the landscape." The love of Paris is mingled in his life with the love of the classic in art. Old Paris never lost its attraction for him; but here at Stanislas his second, equally lasting, and perhaps even greater love came to him—the love of old Greece and of antique beauty.

When he was twelve, he tells us, the stories in Livy wrung tears from his eyes, and roused his admiration of Rome's departed glory: "Every time old M. Chotard with his thick voice repeated this phrase, 'What remained of the Roman army made its way to Canusium under cover of the night,' I saw them pass in silence, under the light of the moon, over

the bare plain, on a road bordered by tombs—I saw them pass, with livid faces, soiled by blood and dust, helmets battered, breast-plates tarnished and dented, swords broken. And that half-veiled vision, which slowly faded away, was so grave, so melancholy, so full of dignity that my heart in my breast leaped with grief and wonder.”

But it was on coming to Greece that he saw beauty at last in her magnificent simplicity. Aesop had not appealed to him. “After Aesop, they gave us Homer. I saw Thetis rise like a white cloud from the sea; I saw Nausicaa and her companions, and the palm-tree of Delos; and the sky and the earth and the sea, and the tearful smile of Andromache. I understood, I felt. For six months I could not escape from the *Odyssey*. . . . Aeschylus meant very little to me; but Sophocles and Euripides opened the enchanted world of heroes and heroines, and gave me my first glimpse of the poetry of misfortune. . . . My head buried in my big dictionary on my desk all splashed with ink, I saw divine figures, ivory-white arms falling upon immaculate tunics, and I heard voices, more beautiful than the most beautiful music, which lamented harmoniously.”

3

France was graduated from the Collège Stanislas in 1864, at the age of twenty. His religion was irretrievably lost, even the flimsy romantic religiosity which he received from his mother. He had already become a pagan, a lover of beauty—the beauty of women and the beauty of art, especially the art of the ancient world.

After leaving college he was forced for a year or two to help his father about the shop. He was probably useless except in the preparation of catalogues. On this task he

worked willingly, for to him a catalogue was a magic land. But he had taken to writing verse, and his father, who had discovered in book-selling the most agreeable of occupations, could not endure the thought that his son might prove to be a maker of books, and even of books of poetry! So the young Anatole, who had been writing poetry since the age of seven, suddenly found himself possessor of a room of his own, up near the Pantheon, in the Luxembourg quarter. He was now free to write verse and to enjoy the society of poets.

He was welcomed at the meetings of the Parnassians in their gathering-place above Alphonse Lemerre's bookshop, and at various cafés of the Latin Quarter. Along with them he was a frequent guest at the home of the Marquise de Ricard, or at that of Nina de Callias, a generous lover of poets, he himself among them.

While devoting himself to poetry for the joy of it, and in the hope of eventual fame, he earned his daily bread by more humble labors. He had a part, for instance, in the compilation of the great Larousse dictionary. He occupied himself somewhat more pleasantly in writing prefaces for French classics which were being published by Lemerre. Like France's later publishers, Lemerre vainly expostulated with the author for never keeping his agreements.

At the age of fifteen France had written an orthodox *Légende de Sainte-Radegonde*, which was privately printed. In 1868 his first work of any consequence appeared, a critical study of Alfred de Vigny. At this time he also contributed critical articles, never republished, to various ephemeral journals.

But his prose was mainly hack work, though some of it was carefully done and has unquestionable merit. His chief ambition was to be ranked among the famous Parnassians.

Two of his earliest poems created a sensation. "To the great scandal of my father," he said to M. Brousson, "I had become a Republican, like all the young men of my caste." A violent admirer of the eighteenth century, he had planned with his friend Xavier de Ricard an enormous *Encyclopédie de la Révolution*. And in 1867 he wrote for the *Gazette rimée* two thinly disguised satires in verse directed against Napoleon III: *Denys, Tyran de Syracuse* and *Les Légions de Varus*.

Most of the verse written by him during the late Sixties was by no means concerned with politics. He formed of it a little collection which appeared in 1873 under the title *Poèmes dorés*. This is good Parnassian poetry, cold, correct, restrained, plastic, in accordance with the ideals of the school. The volume was dedicated to Leconte de Lisle. If we may believe M. Brousson, Anatole France never had any love for Leconte de Lisle. But, it must be said, if we may believe M. Brousson and others, France neither loved nor respected any French writer, old or new, except Rabelais, Racine, Béranger (whose superiority to Victor Hugo he took great joy in demonstrating), and perhaps a few others. And however gently he might write about his contemporaries, in private he spoke ill of them,—“out of tenderness for them,” some of his Boswells say,—sparing not even Renan. In any case he owed much to Leconte de Lisle, and was not chary of publicly recognizing his indebtedness. For the master of the Parnassians not only taught him how to write poetry, he also obtained for him a sinecure in the Senate library. This was in 1876. Just ten years before, France had begun his campaign to secure this post. The events which led to his resignation in 1890 are not entirely to his credit, though he was guilty of nothing more serious than indolence and a certain arrogant indifference to duty.

In the year of his entrance into the Senate library he published his second volume of verse, the *Noces corinthiennes*. The poems of this collection do not differ from those of the first except that they show greater mastery of form, and are more distinctly pagan in character. Here ends France's career as a poet. There is little reason to regret that he deserted verse for prose, for he seems to have had no pronounced poetic power. Furthermore, when one considers the history of French poetry during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, his decision to forsake the muse seems providential. He was always by nature a follower, never a leader. Had he continued to write poetry, he would probably have tried to escape, along with his generation, from the precision and clarity of the Parnassians into the nebulous inane of Symbolism, where his genius would have found itself perplexed and suffering from nostalgic longing for its classic home, though perhaps only vaguely aware of the reason for its distress. It seems distinctly fortunate, therefore, that he sought companions and guides among the prose masters of his age rather than among its poets.

4

The great political event of France's early manhood, the Franco-Prussian war, affected his life only very slightly. It is not referred to in the poems he wrote at the time. He loved to see himself in attitudes. His youth, as he presents it to us, is a series of pictures, essentially true, probably, though somewhat "arranged." The artist has left us a characteristic portrait of himself as he was at the age of twenty-six, with the war of 1870 serving as frame or background: "Did I recognize him, my excellent friend

Fernand Calmettes, witness of those years of my youth whose taste was so often bitter, whose perfume remains so sweet in my memory! . . . We fought side by side as privates in a regiment of the National Guard, under the command of brave Captain Chalamel. . . . But I must admit that we were soldiers of a peculiar kind. I remember that during the battle of the Second of December, while in reserve under the fort of La Faisanderie, we read Virgil's *Silenus* together, to the accompaniment of shells falling into the Marne in front of us."

The national *débâcle* left Anatole France apparently untouched. A mild disenchantment is evident in his poetry, but his complete disillusion and skepticism were yet far in the future. He still believed—not in Christianity, to be sure, but in Science. "Taine's teaching," he says later, "inspired in us, about 1870, an ardent enthusiasm, a sort of religion, what I shall call the dynamic cult of life. He brought us method and observation, philosophy and history—science, in short. . . . At that time we had in the Latin Quarter a passionate consciousness of natural forces, and Taine's books had contributed much to put us in that state of mind." "Eighteen years ago," he writes in 1889 or 1890, ". . . we were enthusiastic determinists. There were of course one or two neo-Catholics among us, but they were full of uneasiness. The fatalists, on the contrary, displayed a serene confidence, which, alas, they have not kept. . . . Darwin's volumes were our Bible. . . . Like Lucretius, we declared, 'A man has come who has freed mankind from vain terrors.' . . . How I imagined that I understood life and love! How sincerely I believed that I had fathomed the divine plan!"

He had been a Republican before the fall of Napoleon III,

"like all the young men of his caste." And even before 1870, "like all the young men of his caste," he had become a convert to the religion of natural forces, an enthusiastic, even fanatical, follower of Taine, Darwin, and Renan.

Before 1880 he wrote three mediocre works of fiction: the *Désirs de Jean Servien*, a singular psychological study, in part autobiographical, written about 1872 but not published until 1882 after it had been softened by a thorough revision; and two novelettes of no particular value, *Jocaste* and the *Chat maigre*, written under the influence of Dickens and Daudet and published in 1879.

His next publication was the work of a new man.

5

The excellence of the *Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*, which appeared in 1881 when France was thirty-seven years old, could not have been predicted from his previous writings. This is his first important contribution to literature. It will perhaps be finally recognized as his greatest work. Here he first shows himself a master of prose style. Here the two main streams of his literary power have their source: his irony and his sentiment. Here too are evident the autobiographical obsession and the bookishness which were always to remain striking characteristics of his manner: he sees reality rather through recollections of his past, or through books, than through observation of the life about him.

A change had come over him. In the first preface to *Jean Servien* (1882) he says: "In rereading the *Désirs de Jean Servien* this year, I myself could not find all that I had put in it at the time I wrote it." He explains that even after he had destroyed half the pages of the version of 1872 and re-

written almost all the rest, the central substance of the original still remained. "That substance," he adds, "has in it something acrid and hard which shocks me now. I should write gentler things today." *Sylvestre Bonnard* is one of those gentler things. Between the writing and the rewriting of *Jean Servien*, Anatole France had lost his second religion. Along with the rest of the young men of his generation, and with Renan himself, he had come to see that the high hope of a millennium soon to be attained through science was unrealizable. He had deserted Darwin and Taine, but he still clung to Renan: "Our master, our light, our dear glory, the finest genius that ever spoke the finest of languages, . . . who was for thirty years the spiritual leader of Europe, . . . M. Renan, whose adorable mind I love to the point of idolatry."

With *Sylvestre Bonnard* he enters a period of complete dilettanteism, the dilettanteism which Renan had made fashionable, compounded of a mildly ironic skepticism, and an elegant and nonchalant aloofness from the stress of life, and a sympathetic and understanding tolerance of everything, without attaching the slightest importance to anything. In this mood he wrote the *Livre de mon Ami*, almost equal to *Sylvestre Bonnard* in charm; *Abeille*, a graceful fairy tale; two books for children; and some short stories.

France's loss of faith in science was not the only cause of his new attitude toward life. He had a second reason for looking upon the world in a less sombre way than when he wrote the first *Jean Servien*. In 1880, he had married Valérie Guérin, and the next year Suzanne was born, the delightful little girl of the second part of the *Livre de mon Ami*. His married life was happy at first, especially after the birth of Suzanne, as the *Livre de mon Ami* amply proves. But within a few years misunderstandings and quarrels began,

terminated finally by divorce in 1891.¹ Suzanne's existence, both before and after the separation of her parents, seems to have been tempestuous. She married a Captain Mollin, was divorced, and became the wife of Michel Psichari, grandson of Renan. Psichari was killed at the front, and Suzanne died in 1918. Her son Lucien went to live with Anatole France at La Béchellerie. Suzanne, it appears, had been guilty of indiscretions which her father never forgave.

Late in his life France said to M. Brousseau (unless the malicious secretary is misleading us): "I was the slave of the blind and anxious tenderness of my parents. And then I married. After the sacrament I learned what hell is."

The details of France's private life after the first few years which followed his marriage are shrouded in mystery for all who have not access to the gossip which passes from lip to lip in Parisian literary circles. Unfortunately they will not remain so. Little will be gained when all the facts of his existence are set down in print for the delectation of a scandal-loving public. His books speak for themselves; it would be well if other voices remained silent. But the full-length biography will some day be written. It will doubtless be called "The True Anatole France," and it will probably leave with us a far uglier picture of the master than one gets even from M. Brousseau.

When the definitive biography is written, it will be discovered, unless I have been misled by all that I have read about Anatole France the man, that there was little fine or lovable in his character, that he was not kindly, generous, or even tolerant, that he was an extreme egoist. It is note-

¹ Certain scenes in the *Mannequin d'Osier* seem to have been drawn from France's domestic experience. See Madame Jeanne Maurice Pouquet, *Le Salon de Madame Arman de Caillavet*, 1926, 121.

worthy that while he was surrounded by scores of ecstatic admirers and numerous acquaintances, he seems to have had no devoted friends except his mother and "Madame,"¹ both of whom were ill requited for their constancy.

Sylvestre Bonnard was crowned by the Academy. Gossip has it that "Madame" was responsible for this first recognition of France's talent. But gossip has always an unreliable as well as an evil tongue. France was not introduced to "Madame" till 1883. She was not agreeably impressed by him at first, disliking especially his obsequious deference. Gradually, in the course of the next few years, charmed by his intelligence, she learned to overlook his defects of character and manner. Already, shortly after the publication of *Sylvestre Bonnard*, he had become a guest in various Parisian *salons*. It was not till 1887 that he became the exclusive possession of "Madame." He was tall and thin, with a somewhat comical nose—certainly not handsome. But he was a dazzling conversationalist, despite, or perhaps even on account of, a slight impediment in his speech. He liked to hold the center of the stage, a monologist rather than a conversationalist, and did so, enthroned, in the *salon* of "Madame" on the Avenue Hoche for more than twenty years.

France owed much to "Madame." She wrote articles which he signed, sometimes without even retouching them; she made translations for him (he knew no modern foreign languages); she planned his books with him. She was an invaluable critic. She awakened his ambition. Above all, she made him work.

¹ Madame Arman de Caillavet, mother of the dramatist Gaston de Caillavet. On this remarkable woman, see A. Maurel, "Le Salon de Madame Arman de Caillavet," in *Souvenirs d'un Ecrivain*, 1925; and especially the volume of Madame Pouquet.

"Madame de C.," says M. Ségur, "knew France when he produced little and spaced his volumes at intervals of five years. She induced him to write and to act, breathed into him ambition, ardor, the spirit of emulation. Every afternoon, installed near him, in front of a little table placed opposite his desk, she urged him to write novels, and, later, speeches, while he had no taste for anything but short tales and pleasant, lazy conversation. She brought him to take part in political struggles; she involved him completely in the Dreyfus Affair. It is probable that but for Madame de C. the *Lys rouge* would never have been written and *Sur la Pierre blanche* and the *Rôtisserie* would have been ten pages long. It was she, and she was justified in boasting about it, who forced him to develop the germ of his novels and who made him extend to the length of a volume the *Histoire comique*, which had at first been conceived and published as a short story. France novelist, France champion of Dreyfus, France author of the *Histoire contemporaine*, is inconceivable without the presence of Madame de C."

One day, while seated in high state at Tridon's bookshop in Tours, in the course of a conversation chronicled by M. Le Goff, France demonstrated that intelligence has proved to be the curse of mankind, and then launched into a eulogy of laziness. "In our democracies," he declared, "we are carried away by the fever of gain, and laziness becomes more and more difficult. Soon it will disappear. With it will go the pretty things that have been the charm of life. We don't know how to be lazy any more. As for me, without Madame Arman de C. I should never have done anything. I have always had to be forced to work."¹

¹ "I have been in a position to observe all that Madame de Caillavet has done for France. I knew him in 1882. At the beginning, he was entirely unknown, except to a few men of letters, and he would have

Laziness was one of France's besetting sins. His first work of importance was produced when he was almost forty. The explanation of this late arrival is to be sought, perhaps, as has frequently been said, in his zeal for perfection; it is to be sought also in his temperamental laziness. Most of those who knew France well have testified to his almost invincible aversion to work. But for such corroborating evidence we should hardly be justified in accepting France's own declarations, for he would be likely to claim as one of his characteristics that indolence which is an indispensable ornament of the dilettante. "Calmann Lévy," he says, "welcomed me when I was obscure, sustained me, scolded me charmingly a thousand times and tried to shake me out of my laziness and my timidity." Earlier still he had paid similar tribute to the good offices of Adrien Hébrard, editor of the *Temps*. "You have," he said, "triumphed over my laziness. . . . To have made me productive is to have achieved a miracle. My excellent friend Calmann Lévy had not succeeded in making me write a single book in six years."

It is literally true that Lévy had not been able, despite all his proddings, to get a single real book from the great writer. The *Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard* is a strangely formed vol-

remained always thus, I believe, but for your mother-in-law. His awkwardness, his timidity, his absolute ignorance of social usages—everything destined him to remain 'sidetracked,' despite all his talent. Madame de Caillavet took him in hand and schooled him thoroughly. We were astonished to notice the relatively rapid change that took place in him, without at first suspecting whence it came. Your mother-in-law did for France exactly what Madame de Loynes did for Lemaitre. In my opinion France did not owe his various successes to his great talent. Most of the people, even among the lettered, who have bowed before him would never have discovered him but for Madame de Caillavet. And, too, but for her he would never have been admitted to the Academy." Letter from Countess de Martel ("Gyp") to Madame Gaston de Caillavet, quoted by Madame Pouquet, 39.

ume. France had written the first part, *La Bûche*, which was too long to be published in a review and too short to form a book. By patient urging Lévy finally prevailed upon France to write *La Fille de Clémentine*. He then printed these two episodes together as the *Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*. Some of the most glaring signs of stitching were removed after the first edition, but the book still shows traces of the suture. The *Livre de mon Ami* is made up in somewhat the same way: to the *Livre de Pierre* is added the *Livre de Suzanne*; and then the dialogue on fairy tales, which has no connection with what precedes, is appended for good measure. The *Livre de mon Ami* was not published until 1885. Much of it, and a large part of *Sylvestre Bonnard*, had been written before 1880.

But, at any rate, whether it was Hébrard or "Madame" who "triumphed over [his] laziness," in 1886 France began to work at a regular task—painfully, we may be sure. In this year he assumed the responsibility of contributing an article each week to the *Temps*. His "Life in Paris" began with the issue of March 21, 1886. His "Literary Life" began with the issue of January 16, 1887. These are the articles which make up the four volumes of the *Vie littéraire*, published from 1888 to 1892. Charming at the time of their appearance from week to week in the *Temps*, and still charming, they have hardly retained their vitality, and will probably continue to be read, not as critical studies, but as the pleasant record of an impressionable and discursive mind. They are not comparable with the work of Lemaître as impressionistic criticism. In 1889, with an article on Bourget's *Disciple*, began France's attack on Brunetière, during which impressionism waged war against a criticism based on more or less objective standards.

The controversy with Brunetière marks the beginning of a new period in France's life. During the Eighties he had basked in the sun of care-free dilettanteism. He begins an article of the *Vie littéraire* with the following melancholy reflection on a contented life of ease and idleness which is no more: "I have lived happy years without writing." The article is a review of Brochard's "Greek Skeptics." The book is mentioned in a Postscript. The article itself is evidence that France is passing into a mood of less indulgent dilettanteism and more truculent skepticism.

The change is already apparent in some of the stories in the volume entitled *Balthazar* (1889). It is unveiled and conspicuous in *Thaïs* (1890). It was this study of an Egyptian courtesan who is saved and of a pious hermit who is damned that brought France to the attention of a very wide public of readers. In it he makes his first violent assault upon Christianity. Here he argues that that sensuality which dominated his own life to an astounding degree is one of man's great virtues.

The anti-Christian bias of *Thaïs* was not perceived by readers unfamiliar with the wiles of irony. Nor were pious readers greatly alarmed by the equally effective subtlety of the *Procurateur de Judée*, the most famous of France's short stories, which appeared in the *Etui de Nacre* (1892). But a book which was published the next year, one that is in reality not nearly so destructive of religious belief as *Thaïs* or even the *Procurateur*, raised the alarm—the *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque*. France was now recognized as the Diderot and the Voltaire of the nineteenth century. Renan was no longer his sole mentor, having been in large part superseded by the great eighteenth century iconoclasts. The

Abbé Coignard, incarnation of voluptuousness, jovial, learned, and pious, is the hero of the *Rôtisserie*. With all his faults (chiefly because of his faults, in fact) Coignard is the most memorable of the characters created by France; and the badly constructed, in part very tedious, *Rôtisserie* is the best of France's books, with the exception of that one in which are related the unexciting adventures of Sylvestre Bonnard.

The *Jardin d'Epicure*, which appeared in 1894, is not a book at all, but a collection of unconnected, philosophical thoughts which had been previously published in a Paris newspaper. It is by no means such delectable reading as the *Rôtisserie*, but of all France's volumes it is the one which most completely represents his mind and art. It is the breviary of Francianism. In mood it lies midway between the comparative mildness of the *Rôtisserie* and the causticity of the *Ile des Pingouins*.

During the period covered by the works just mentioned, France had become familiar with fashionable life. Writing under the influence of Bourget, he offers the results of his observation¹ in the *Lys rouge*, a study of the ravages of sensuality in the *haut monde*. This great human virtue is shown to be accompanied in high society by a passion which is less noticeable in the humbler sphere of the Abbé Coignard—jealousy.

8

We are about to witness a new transformation in Anatole France, but he will still remain fundamentally unchanged. There is this much of incontrovertible truth in the determinism which France embraced and rejected: the human being

¹ And of that of "Madame." See Madame Pouquet, 144 ff.

remains what he was at birth unless inner or outer forces are strong enough to alter his character. France "was always under the domination of somebody," says M. Ségur. His life was controlled by feminine tyrants: first his mother, then his wife; after that, "Madame," till Mademoiselle Laprévotte took her place. But no one of these had any appreciable effect upon the disposition with which nature had endowed him, particularly since he had no desire to be other than what he was. "Madame" made him work, but he always worked unwillingly and remained to the end as indolent as he had been at the beginning. He remained too a dilettante, incapable of real seriousness, constantly playing with his own life and thought, and with the life and thought of others. He hated suffering. He loved ease and luxury. He loved beauty, and he loved above all sensuality—the vulgar sensuality of the *Rôtisserie* and the gilded voluptuousness of the *Lys rouge*. Such was his character at his birth; such it remained till his death.

The Dreyfus Affair, therefore, wrought only a superficial transformation in him. Exactly why Anatole France, lover of ease, scorner of mankind, became involved in the crusade for the rehabilitation of a Jewish captain fraudulently condemned for treason is not entirely clear. Pity and a passion for justice are considered by many critics his primary motives. I cannot find in his life and works sufficient ground for this belief.

Two powerful incentives are evident: the influence of "Madame" and his antipathy to the Church. "Madame" was of Jewish blood, and it seems that she, conscious of her high merit, resented her exclusion on racial grounds from Parisian high society. It was the aristocratic and reactionary Catholic party that resisted the revision of an erroneous verdict handed down some years before by a military tri-

bunal. "Madame's" enmity toward the Church merely added fuel to a flame long since kindled in Anatole France. We have seen his early conversion to paganism, and his slowly rising hostility to a religion which was a thorn to an egoist who worshipped Venus.

How far "Madame's" social aspirations and France's paganism are responsible for the anti-clerical activity of the latter, it is difficult to say. An additional and important reason is certainly to be found in the fact that the Church had suddenly become a coercive political power, dangerous not only to hedonists like Anatole France but also to countless other Frenchmen, who demanded no more than justice and a reasonable liberty. It was necessary at this critical moment that every citizen take his stand on one side or on the other, and neither "Madame" nor Anatole France could join the forces of repression.

We can only wonder, as we look back, that the partisans of the Church should have been surprised when France openly declared himself their opponent. In 1896 they were still blind to his real attitude. They looked upon him as one who derides religion affectionately, and aided in his election to the Academy in preference to his rival, the anti-clerical Ferdinand Fabre. It seems inexplicable to us now that they did not recognize in the author of *Thaïs* and the creator of Jérôme Coignard a most formidable antagonist. Jules Lemaître, one of the most influential friends of the Church, wrote a review of the *Lys rouge* just before the storm broke. France's trifling with sacred things leaves him troubled and puzzled, but no more than troubled and puzzled. "That impious and affectionate preoccupation of M. France with the mystic life is becoming singular in its insistence and its continuance . . .," he says. "I am very curious to know whither it will lead him." He had not long to wait for

enlightenment. On January 13, 1898, he found the name of Anatole France among those of numerous other Intellectuals of Paris at the end of Zola's famous letter, "I Accuse!"

In those days dilettanteism had not yet passed away, and it was believed that one could be "impious" and "affectionate" at the same time.

France had, when he was roused (the evidence is in his works and in the revelations of his intimates), all the fury, the lack of moderation, the love of destruction, of a man who is by nature timid and lazy.

Only one volume of the *Histoire contemporaine* is devoted to the Dreyfus Affair, though all are distinctly unorthodox in religious matters. The first three, the *Orme du Mail*, the *Mannequin d'Osier*, and the *Anneau d'Améthyste*, published in 1897 and 1899 after having appeared piecemeal in Paris newspapers, are a formidable arraignment of provincial French life. All classes, from the populace to the nobility, are held up to scorn. The narrow prejudices, the petty intrigues, the small scandals, the ugliness and stupidity of a small city are mercilessly unfolded. M. Bergeret, a professor of Latin, is the hero of the series. He is promoted to a professorship at the Sorbonne, and in the fourth volume, *Monsieur Bergeret à Paris* (1901), Anatole France continues to express through the scholar's lips his own views on current topics, giving especial attention here to the Dreyfus Affair.

9

France's antagonism to the Church continued unabated to the end of his days, becoming ever more and more denunciatory. But he was not so constant in his relation to socialism, which, like so many other Frenchmen, he was led soon

to embrace because it was the ally of anti-clericalism, and because the hope of the future seemed to lie in the working classes, exempt as they appeared to be from the stupid prejudices of the bourgeois. His admiration for Jaurès and his hostility to the Church brought him into close association with the parties of the left. He presided and spoke at numberless meetings arranged by the radicals. He had little facility as a public speaker, and always, it seems, read his addresses. But, though no orator, he was an impressive figure on a platform, tall and elegant, carrying well the prestige of a great name. He was listened to by the humble as their champion and by leaders as the bright ornament of their cause. After 1900, however, his equalitarian enthusiasm was not infrequently suspended, and the rest of his life is a continual oscillation between socialistic fervor and mockery of socialistic ideals. There was real confusion in his political attitude—not merely a successive shifting from one party to another, but a shifting back and forth. He was at times a socialist, and at times a communist; at times he flirted with the anarchists; and at times he attacked all radical parties. There is no reason to doubt his sincerity, however various his opinions may have been, though one may wonder if a sincerity so diversely employed was bred of real conviction. He was sincere when he spoke at socialist meetings, he was sincere when he wrote burning manifestos and pamphlets at the request of the party. He was sincere when he embraced communism. He was sincere too when in the intervals between meetings of the proletariat he attacked all forms of radicalism, as he did in the *Ile des Pingouins* (1908), the *Dieux ont Soif* (1912), and the *Révolte des Anges* (1914). These three volumes constitute the best literary work of his last twenty-five years, since the *Petit Pierre* and the *Vie en Fleur* are weak attempts to repeat the

success of the admirable *Livre de mon Ami*; and since the anti-clerical *Jeanne d'Arc* (1908), despite numerous fine passages, can hardly be considered a great work of art.

Jeanne d'Arc is the last of France's works written under the influence of "Madame," who died January 12, 1910. It has been said that her end was hastened by the infidelity and ingratitude of the man whose devoted Egeria she had been for over two decades; but the *Souvenirs* of M. Maurel seem to prove the falsity of this accusation. And yet . . . The last, sad pages of Madame Pouquet's volume, especially by what they leave unsaid, drive one to the conviction that the great writer forgot the debt he had contracted, and grievously disappointed his "amie incomparable." "*He* pretends to be much interested in me." "I am by no means cured, and M. France feigns ignorance of the cause of my condition. . . . I have not the courage to live that portion of my life which remains before me." These are fragments from letters written by "Madame" after France's return from Argentina.

"When Madame Arman de Caillavet met France," says Madame Pouquet—and the note of bitterness which the author seems to have tried hard to exclude, here eludes her vigilance—"he was awkward, timid, uncouth, lazy, and poor. It was she who created that fame which, instead of irradiating their age and their affection, as might have been justly expected, caused the poor woman to suffer outbursts of irritation, quarrels, and cruel sorrows."

The little story of Crainquebille, the costermonger, is the most successful, perhaps the single successful, artistic production of France's career as defender of the proletariat. There is no decided literary merit in the discourses collected under the title *Vers les Temps meilleurs*; they are interesting, with one or two notable exceptions, only because they

show the warmth and the sincerity of France's radical tendencies.

The three great works of France's last years were decidedly discomfiting to the parties of the left. The *Ile des Pingouins* is a sweeping condemnation of French society from top to bottom, sparing neither friends such as Dreyfusards and socialists, nor foes such as—the rest of the human race, with the exception of lovers. The *Dieux ont Soif* is the best book written by France since the *Lys rouge*. All republicans of every color were perplexed and irritated by this reactionary work, in which the fathers of their country, the heroes of the great Revolution, are unmercifully pilloried. The *Révolte des Anges* is sheer anarchy. In it are to be found the main tenets of the Francian creed, each in its extreme form: extreme sensuality, extreme irreligion, extreme cynicism, extreme contempt for man and all his works.

The year of the publication of the *Dieux ont Soif* was the terrible year. France had defended the army as late as 1891. Then he slowly changed, along with the great mass of the French people. Long before 1914 war was anathema to him and to them. But at the beginning of hostilities, as every one knows, he marched to the ministry of war and demanded a rifle. He was then just seventy years of age. His public pronouncements during the war were such as the ministry approved. They are printed, many of them, in *Sur la Voie glorieuse*, and elsewhere. Privately, he declared his abhorrence of this war as of all others and expressed the hope of a speedy peace at almost any price. His friends were distressed that his public and his private utterances were not in accord, and wondered that he was unwilling to defend openly the "comrades" who were in prison awaiting trial and in danger of death. But Anatole France was always a thinker and a man of words, not a man of action.

Of his life after the war there is little to say. He had for many years been living in an *impasse* off the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne at the Villa Saïd, a luxurious dwelling, magnificently furnished, a veritable museum of precious works of art. At the time of the first German advance on Paris he moved to La Béchellerie, an estate at Saint-Cyr, near Tours. There he lived during the war. After 1918 he retained his war home, and dwelt now there, now at the Villa Saïd. He was of all great men probably the easiest of access. He welcomed everybody who sought admittance to the Villa Saïd or La Béchellerie. Numerous volumes of recollections of the great ironist will probably be published. It is from half a dozen such volumes and from a considerable number of magazine articles of a similar sort that a large part of this account of the master's life and character has been compiled. The testimony of his biographers, however different their attitude toward him may be, is singularly uniform in so far as the striking qualities of his nature are concerned.

Three further events must be chronicled. In 1921 France was accorded the Nobel Prize awarded annually for "the most remarkable literary work of idealistic stamp." In 1922 all of his works were placed on the "Index of Forbidden Books" by decree of the Papal Curia. Two years before, he married his housekeeper, Mademoiselle Emma Laprévotte, a totally uneducated woman with "the mind of a servant," formerly "Madame's" chambermaid.

Anatole France died on October 12, 1924. His funeral was the occasion of a demonstration which calls to mind the last adieux to those two other great national literary heroes, Voltaire and Victor Hugo.

PART I—THE THINKER

FRANCE'S HUMANISM

Last words of the Abbé Coignard to his faithful disciple, Jacques Tournebroche:

“Shun women and books for the softness and pride which are derived from them. . . . O my dear son, heed not those who like me indulge in sophistries on good and evil. Let not thyself be touched by the beauty and subtlety of their discourse, for the kingdom of God consists, not in words, but in virtue.

Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque.

CHAPTER I

THE SENSUALIST

1

ANATOLE FRANCE, skeptic, apostle of disillusion, prophet of nihilism, enjoyed a singularly happy, serene, and successful career, and died full of years, laden with honors, and lamented by the whole civilized world.

From the philosophy expounded in those brilliant works in which he eloquently proves the inanity of human existence, the stupidity of man, the ludicrous futility of every endeavor to render life on this planet anything better than a "tragic absurdity," readers might naturally infer that France was a bitter, misanthropic recluse, bristling with scorn and hatred of life, and burning with a desire to escape from it as soon as possible. Such was not the case: despite his contempt for man and man's affairs, he loved life intensely.

He expresses himself readily through his characters. It is a fixed principle with him that writers do not see the world objectively, but always disclose the secrets of their own minds while seeming to create personages extraneous to themselves. This principle is, in general, not entirely trustworthy; it is almost wholly so, however, in the case of France, who with quite unusual readiness and extraordinary frankness lays bare his most intimate thoughts and emotions. It is, in fact, out of his own experience as a writer that he created his doctrine of inescapable subjectivity: his heroes

despise man and the interests of man, as he does—and, like him, love life.

M. Larive-du-Mont, administrator of the Zoölogical Gardens, is appalled by the nothingness which follows death.

"Nothingness," he says, "is at once the impossible and the certain: it is inconceivable, yet it exists. The misery of man, and his crime, lies in having discovered these things. The other animals do not know them: we ought to have been forever ignorant of them. To be and cease to be! The horror of this idea makes my hair stand on end; it never leaves me. . . . An uncommon strength of mind is required to be an atheist. A religious training and a mystical bent have brought you to fear and hate human life. . . ." He himself does not hate life; he loves it fiercely. "As for me," he continues (Anatole France is sixty-five years old at the time M. Larive-du-Mont pronounces these words)—"as for me, I love life, the life of this earth, life as it is, this dog's life (*la chienne de vie*). I love it brutal, vile, and gross; I love it sordid, unclean, decayed; I love it stupid, half-witted, and cruel; I love it in its obscenity, in its ignominy, in its infamy, with its impurity, its hideousness, and its squalor, its corruption and its stench. Feeling that it is escaping and fleeing from me, I tremble like a coward and become mad with despair."

"And what infuriates me," resumes the scientist, "is that when we are both dead, I shall not even have the satisfaction of saying: 'You see, La Galissonière, I was not mistaken; there is nothing.' I shall not enjoy the pleasure of having been right, and you will never be undeceived. What a price we pay for thought! You are unhappy because your mind is stronger and more capacious than that of the animals and the majority of men. And I am unhappier than you because I have greater genius."¹

This affirmation of the desire to live is, I think, more emphatic than others to be found in the works of Anatole France.² It seems to reflect, however, a characteristic state of mind. Though he was much more convinced than most

¹ *Sept Femmes de la Barbe-Bleue*, 256-260.

² But compare *Dieux ont Soif*, 316-317; *Révolution des Anges*, 158.

of us that living is a "tragic absurdity," he was not more ready than we to disappear into nothingness, and loved life with an intensity which may justifiably occasion surprise. For that ordinary human beings should cling tenaciously to life, in proportion perhaps to their stupidity, is to be expected, but that a man like Anatole France, whose clear intelligence has liberated him from common prejudices and superstitions and brought him a vision of the "ignorance and imbecility of mankind," and of "the nightmare of that wretched sleep which we call life"—that such a man should still love life like the rest of us, and even more intensely than a great many of us, makes one wonder if the philosopher has not, by neglecting the last step in his logical development, discredited slightly his entire argument.

It is not of course that we expect cynics and philosophical nihilists to destroy themselves. For we recognize that they, like other animals, cling instinctively to life. But we feel a little cheated if they expend their genius to make us hate existence while loving it themselves more passionately than we did even before we listened to them.

2

Like M. Larive-du-Mont, Anatole France loved life even in its brutality, its sordidness, and its stupidity. He loved it for the beauty which exists in spite of all the world's grossness. "The sense of the beautiful guides me," he says.¹ He loved it especially for its sensuality. It is given to few men to take delight in beauty in the same measure as this highly sensitive, finely tempered aesthete; but many more may follow him in his reconciliation with life through the charms of sensuality.

¹ *Vie littéraire*, II, iv.

The intimate relation between the sense of beauty and sensuality has always been recognized. So true is this, that ages which have been fearful of the dangers of sensuality have felt that beauty must needs be distrusted, and if possible banished. The pagan world accepted both; the early Christian world proscribed both. Puritanism was hostile to one and the other. Successive rehabilitations of the senses—in the Renaissance and in our own time, for instance—have removed some of the odium which since the fall of Rome has attached to them. It cannot be gainsaid that we have returned to something like the attitude toward them which prevailed before the triumph of Christianity. It is no longer permissible to denounce sensuality without qualification. The modern world is determined that sensibility and love, manifestations of susceptibility to the attraction of beauty, are no longer to be condemned utterly even if their acceptance implies a greatly increased toleration of sensuality: the aesthetic faculties of man and one of his strongest instincts are not without a qualm to be sacrificed to ethical exigencies.

Sensuality is complex, however, and may assume many forms, some of which will continue doubtless to meet with unquestioned reprobation. For in sensuality there is a satyr as well as a nymph. The average man will be unaware of its twofold nature, and will approve or condemn it without nice discrimination. The man of fine aesthetic perceptions will make a distinction: he will recognize that it is with the nymph alone that beauty can consort, and he will see in the satyr beauty's mortal enemy. If he is seriously concerned with the great experiment of the modern world—the emancipation of the senses and the return to paganism—if he is one of those artists who see with exceptional clarity the problems of the age in which they live, and consider themselves

bound to aid in their solution, he will demonstrate the irreconcilable opposition between the satyr and the nymph and the desperate effort of each to overmaster the other. He will abase the satyr and exalt the nymph (if not in the name of morals, whose cause he may feel to be the business of others, then at least in the name of beauty)—if he is sincerely concerned with human happiness, the end which justifies the only true hedonism and the only valid aestheticism.

Sensuality dominates the personality of Anatole France as it pervades his work. "Desire has been my guide throughout all my life," he says in 1913; "I may say that my existence has been nothing but one long desire. I love to desire; of desire I love both the joys and the sufferings."¹ In 1922 he reaffirms his allegiance: "I have always believed that the only reasonable thing is to seek pleasure"; and: "I have loved life for its own sake, I have loved it without veils, in its nakedness, now terrible, now charming. Poverty preserves for those she loves the only true possession in the world, the gift which makes beings and things beautiful, which scatters its charm and its perfumes on nature,—Desire."²

These sentences, which define the master passion of Jean Servien, of the Abbé Coignard, of Paphnuce and Nicias, of Dechartre and Trublet and Brotteaux des Ilettes, and which are repeated in various forms again and again from the *Noces corinthiennes* (1876) to the *Révolte des Anges* (1914), are a sufficient commentary on the autobiographic revelation contained in the statement of M. Larive-du-Mont which I quoted from the *Sept Femmes de la Barbe-Bleue* (1909). France despises and hates life for its ugliness, its imbecility,

¹ *Petit Pierre*, 325–326.

² *Vie en Fleur*, 341. His intense devotion to the sensual life was well known to his intimates.

and its emptiness; he loves it because with death the senses lose their potency. He loves the joys and the sufferings of life; it is difficult indeed as one reads him to determine which he loves more. If one examines his utterances candidly, one is driven to a conclusion which is so preposterous that it must be erroneous: he loves life for the sensuality of its suffering even more than for the sensuality of its joy. He terminates a review of Bourget's *Mensonges* as follows:

"This book, which bears the accent of inimitable truth, induces despair from one end to the other. Its taste is more bitter than death. It leaves ashes in the mouth. That is why I went to the fountain of life; that is why I opened the *Imitation of Christ* and read its salutary words. But we do not like to be saved. On the contrary, we fear we may be deprived of the voluptuousness of damning ourselves. The best of us are like Rachel, who did not wish to be consoled."¹

Such an attitude to suffering is contrary to the spirit of that paganism which was with France an almost constant source of inspiration. It is an evidence of the influence of Christianity on a man who was essentially un-Christian. The ancients loved life in a more placid, natural way than the extreme sensualist of the nineteenth century. France realized this fact fully. He refers often to their serene sadness in the face of inevitable death, which is in sharp contrast with his own horror of death and his ferocious love of life. "They loved the light of day," he says in one of his most beautiful passages, "and thought sadly of the life of the souls in the kingdom of shades."²

There can be no doubt that France was temperamentally a pagan, and that something of the old frank, open, unashamed

¹ *Vie littéraire*, I, 355.

² *Sur la Pierre blanche*, 20. Compare: "The Greeks feared death, but they did not make it ugly." *Vie littéraire*, II, 85. See also *ibid.*, I, 344.

joy in life was renewed in him. But it was impossible to be an unspoiled pagan at the end of the nineteenth century. His sensuality, which was at first innocent because it was natural and was the product of an instinctive response to emotional stimulation and poetic impressionability, became conscious and defiant in the presence of a bitterly hostile state of civilization. So it is that the innocuous paganism of the *Noces corinthiennes* passed through the unconscious shamelessness of the *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque* to the lubricity of the *Révolte des Anges*. It may be possible to establish a satisfactory reconciliation between pagan sensuality and the ideals of the modern world, but one cannot help feeling that Anatole France has aided little toward the consummation of this end. The fault, assuredly, did not lie entirely with the ideals of the modern world, for France asked of them not a pliant disposition to abate their rigor, but complete abdication. To this they have not been willing to consent.

Paganism in the person of Nicias warned the Christian Paphnuce: "Fear to offend Venus; her vengeance is terrible."¹ France wrote *Thaïs* to prove that Venus is not dead, that she must still be venerated as of old, that she is implacable in pursuit of those who refuse to burn incense at her shrine.

It may be seriously questioned whether the Venus to whom France erects altar after altar is the noblest of the many Venuses known to the pagan world. If love is anything more than animal lust, Anatole France seems strangely unaware of the fact.

The term love must be stripped of half its traditional meaning when used in relation to France. His men and

¹ *Thaïs*, 61.

women are not lovers as poets use the word. They desire to possess or be possessed, and nothing more. Their love is not that of Paris and Helen, of the legendary Abelard and Héloïse, of Romeo and Juliet, of Saint-Preux and Julie, and of all the myriads who are swept on forever with Dido and Paolo and Francesca by the breath of passion, undaunted, and consoled in their misery because each may say of an eternal companion—

Questi, che mai da me non fia diviso.

I have named only lovers of olden days. Love is something different now, if we may trust France, from the passion which formerly ruled the world. Coignard, Tournebroche, Catherine, Jahel, Thérèse, Dechartre, Choulette, Mme de Bonmont, Mme de Gromance, and the unsavory world of the *Histoire contemporaine* and of the *Histoire comique*: all of these represent the contemporary rather than the romantic idea of love, and are evidence that in the new paganism, unlike the old, love is a simple thing, not different in the experience of men from what it is in that of the lower animals. "The Japanese do not think themselves of another essence than the lower animals. How lovable this makes them to me," says France.¹

It is difficult to discover that love ever meant to France anything beyond mere carnal desire.² He does, to be sure, occasionally conceive what seems to be a discriminating lover, as in the *Histoire comique* and the *Lys rouge*. But in

¹ Preface to Couchoud's *Japanese Impressions* (dated 1920).

² M. Ségur protested one day that there was something in love besides physical passion. "Ah, you think so?" replied France, "in that tone of enigmatic irony which was habitual with him." *Conversations avec Anatole France*, 183. "He believes," says M. Brousson (*Anatole France en Pantoufles*, 140), "that Auguste Comte was never a lover in the carnal sense—the true sense."

the former, what appears to be love proves to be merely jealousy for one's possessions; and in the *Lys rouge*, as has been pointed out by several critics, Dechartre's emotion is the emotion of jealousy rather than of love, and the passion which he and his mistress feel was never anything more than crudely physical:

"She remembered that she had said to him one day: 'The love you have for me is merely sensual. I do not complain, for it is perhaps the only true love.' And he had replied: 'It is also the only great and strong love. . . . It is full of senses and of images. It is violent and mysterious. It attaches itself to the flesh and to the soul of the flesh. The rest is only illusion and lies.' She was almost tranquil in her joy."¹

The power of a purely physical love is shown in an amazing passage of the *Dieux ont Soif*. Gamelin had caused the death of a man whom he suspected of being a former lover of his mistress.

"'Wretch!'" cries she. "'You killed him, and he was not my lover. I did not know him. I never saw him. What kind of man was he? He was young, amiable, innocent. And you killed him, wretch, wretch that you are!'

"She fell swooning. But in the shades of that soft death, she felt herself flooded at the same time by horror and voluptuousness. She returned partially to life; her heavy lids rose to show the whites of her eyes, her throat swelled, her groping hands sought her lover. She pressed him in her arms in a crushing embrace, sank her nails in his flesh, and gave him, with torn lips, the mutest, dumbest, longest, most grief-stricken, and most delicious of kisses.

"She loved him with all her flesh, and the more he seemed to her terrible, cruel, atrocious—the more she saw him covered with the blood of his victims—the more she hungered and thirsted for him."²

¹ *Lys rouge*, 358.

² *Dieux ont Soif*, 242-243.

In such a love France finds consolation, and the warrant for his reconciliation with life. Of this love he makes the end of existence. "It seems," he says, "as if all nature has no other aim than to throw beings into each other's arms and to have them enjoy, between one infinite nothingness and another, the momentary intoxication of a kiss."¹ To such a love he advises his secretary to consecrate his life: "Make love night and day," he urges, "winter and summer. It is for that that you are in the land of the living. All the rest is but vanity, vapor, deception. There is only one learning: love! There is only one riches: love! There is only one politics: love!"²

The rebuilding of the temple of Venus is, France thinks, the primary achievement of modern times. When in his history of the post-Roman world he arrives at the moment of the emergence of the modern spirit in the Renaissance, he discovers a symbol of this important change in a transformation which took place in the moon. The old man carrying fagots on his shoulder, who for ages had been seen in the disk, fell into the sea, and his place was taken by two lovers kissing each other on the mouth. Thus the keystone of the modern movement is the release of the senses. The liberation of thought occupies only a secondary position.³

Only one passion threatens love's primacy as the motive of human action. "Hunger and love are the two axes of the world," says France. "All humanity revolves on love and hunger."⁴ There is some truth in this statement, but one might have expected from the subtlest *littérateur* of our

¹ *Vie littéraire*, I, 347.

² Brousson, 293. Is he speaking jocosely or seriously? Who knows? In any case his life and his books show that he meant what he said here, some deduction being made in view of his habit of exaggeration.

³ *Ile des Pingouins*, 158 ff.

⁴ *Vie littéraire*, I, 347.

times an elaboration of the thesis in which the crudeness of overstatement inherent in all unqualified generalizations would be softened by appropriate nuances. But, especially in the matter of love and sensuality, as might be inferred from his treatment of them in his novels, France finds no lights and shades. Sensuality is to him the fundamental human virtue. Of an altruist, devoted to mankind, he says: "He is not human, because he is not sensual."¹ And the cruelty of the judges of the Revolution was due to the fact that they were only "slightly sensual."²

"Here is Montbard," says the Abbé Coignard; "I do not know this village, but I do not hesitate to assert on the basis of my knowledge of the world that the people who live here, our fellow-men, are selfish, cowardly, perfidious, gluttonous, licentious. . . . The only point on which hesitation is possible is whether these people are more drawn toward food than toward reproduction. . . . Hunger is for these wretches a more pressing need than love. . . . They respect modesty, which is an element of hypocrisy, huge but common, consisting in saying only rarely what we think about constantly."³

France allots to sensuality a great responsibility for human activities in the case of such ordinary individuals as the inhabitants of Montbard and of such a typical Frenchman of the old school as the hero of the *Révolte des Anges*, about whom he says: "Less devoted to sports and violent exercises than most of the young men of his generation, he remained unconsciously true to the old erotic tradition of his race."⁴ In the case of geniuses, the importance of sensuality is, in his opinion, if he has been rightly reported, greater still, constituting, in fact, a large element of their excep-

¹ *Lys rouge*, 63.

² *Dieux ont Soif*, 200.

³ *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque*, 304-305.

⁴ P. 66.

tional native endowment. He is quoted as saying in regard to Rodin: "I cannot reproach him with his eroticism, for I know well that sensuality makes up three-fourths of the genius of great artists."¹

3

Thus love is to France merely a matter of sensuality, as it is to the characters of Zola's novels, and to many people in the world of reality. "Properly speaking," he says, "love is a liver complaint and you are never sure of not falling ill."² So naturalistic is his conception of love that he, the fine aesthete, who was at first so pure a pagan, seems easily to forget the nymph who attended the ancient Venus, and to rejoice in the power of the satyr who followed unwelcome in her train. Sensuality is, with France, not necessarily associated with his cult of the beautiful, not rooted in the sense of beauty. It is carnal desire, as it was in ancient times; but with him such a desire may be satisfied—contrary to the pagan ideal—without fastidiousness as to the choice of a partner. "I have always loved women very much," he is said to have declared in his old age; "and I confess that in my youth I preferred quantity to quality. I desired them all, but I had a predilection for shop-girls."³

¹ Gsell, *Les Matinées de la Villa Saïd*, 216.

² *Thaïs*, 75.

³ Le Goff, *Anatole France à la Béchellerie*, 130. Caution must of course be observed in the use of the recently published accounts of France's private life. Some inaccuracy in the reporting of conversations is inevitable, and the reporter may easily fail to distinguish between what the master says seriously and what he says more or less jestingly. The magnitude of the second difficulty, every reader of France's works will appreciate. No allowances need be made for the infidelity of his memory, the tenacity of which even to his last days is notable. There seems, too, little reason to discount his statements because of his advanced years. Despite inevitable physical deterioration, he remained mentally and

The Marquis Tedesco discovered that Jean Servien was in love with a successful actress, and expostulated with his young friend:

"How much preferable would it be," he said, "for you to love a simple working girl whom you could seduce by offering her ten centimes' worth of fried potatoes and the privilege of seeing a melodrama from the top gallery. I fear that you are the dupe of popular opinion, for one woman is not very different from another, and it is nothing but current belief, that mistress of the world, which makes some priceless and others of little value."¹

The Abbé Coignard, Tournebroche, Choulette are, like the early Penguins, beasts of the field. The ugliness of their amours is diminished, if you like, by the fact that they do not know what shame is, but their love is certainly not beautiful. Elsewhere, however,—in the *Lys rouge*, the *Histoire contemporaine*, the *Histoire comique*, or in some of the tales, for instance,—it ought to be possible to find love and beauty (a beauty which is not merely superficial) hand in hand, graciously responsive to each other, in conformity with the pagan and with the aesthetic ideal. But one seeks in vain.

Brotteaux (an *alter ego* of France himself) is as troubled by the presence of a "slattern" as he was in his more prosperous days by the perfumed charms of a countess. Every reader remembers the scene in which a friend of Brotteaux,

morally essentially unchanged. However, it is a wise counsel of prudence to ignore in the books of MM. Le Goff, Brousson, Ségur, Gsell, and others whatever is not corroborated explicitly or implicitly by France's published works.

M. Brousson was dismissed from France's service. That he wrote with some rancor cannot be doubted, but, although he clearly takes delight in disclosing the great man's frailties, mainly by innuendo, a comparison of his work with other sources of information does not justify the statement sometimes made by devotees of the master that he seriously misrepresented the facts.

¹ *Désirs de Jean Servien*, 118.

an artist, engages in a voluptuous adventure in a farm loft, among fleas and filth, without being in the slightest degree repelled by the surroundings nor by the hideousness of his victim. Zola, France declares, was "one of those wretches about whom one might say that it would have been better if they had never been born."¹ He hated Zola because the latter's bestiality was a stench in an aesthete's nostrils. And yet there are not a few scenes in his own novels, especially in the later ones, which are hardly distinguishable from the most notorious in the works of Zola. Zola was not controlled by that "sense of the beautiful" which France declared to have been his own guide throughout life. He had not the fine sensitiveness of France, who rightly said: "If one has no taste, one shocks even those who have none."²

The transformation of a great writer from the unspoiled pagan of the *Noces corinthiennes* into the erotic chronicler of the *Révolte des Anges* is a little depressing to those who believe that the world may depart from the impossible and undesirable restraint of the Middle Ages without embracing unguardedly the notions that the sex impulse is to be cultivated in its simplest form, unconditioned by aesthetic, social, or ethical considerations, and that it explains all in man and in his activities except the little which is to be accounted for by hunger.

4

I think I have not unduly narrowed the sense of the word love as Anatole France understands it; nor that of the word sensuality, when he uses it in connection with love. He ap-

¹ *Vie littéraire*, I 236.

² *Ibid.*, I, 17.

plies the words sensuality and voluptuousness to other forms of sense experience also. Most French writers use these words at times in reference to sex specifically, and at other times in reference to the whole life of the senses. It is not safe, I think, for me to try to substitute other English terms for them, since the relationship with sexual experience, which is generally, if not always, present in France's mind when he uses the words, would then be lost.

France discovered and savored the sensuality of religion, or, more correctly, of religiosity, in the manner of the Romantic poets.¹ In describing a sensation he once felt in the woods of Ville d'Avray, he says: "The oppression I experienced in that silence, traversed by a sort of continuous tinkling, was at the same time sensual and religious."² To him religion, like every other human quest, was in reality the fruitless pursuit of happiness by the way of sense. As Paphnuce is departing for the desert, there to resume a life

¹ Jules Lemaitre says in his review of the *Noces corinthiennes*: "We feel in the Gospels a certain profound charm, mystic and vaguely sensual. We love them for the stories of the Samaritan woman, of Mary of Magdala, and of the woman taken in adultery." He adds: "And perhaps also we enjoy the pleasure of interpreting this singular book in a heterodox manner." *Contemporains*, II, 92. "I love the ceremonial of religious service," said France, even after he had become the avowed enemy of the Church. *Anneau d'Améthyste*, 209. Neither a Lemaitre nor an Anatole France is capable of the crude assertions of the identity of religious emotion and sensuality which one frequently encounters in conversation and in print, but they cannot be held entirely exempt from responsibility for the degradation of their doctrines in the hands of their disciples. In a recent number of an American monthly, which aims to satisfy the demands of our thinking public, the author of a striking article casually lets fall the observation that "sexual and religious emotion are very similar." One wonders, if this is true, why there is not more religion in the world. The reason is, perhaps, that, though sexual and religious emotion may have something in common (as man and the oak tree have something in common), yet the gulf between them is prodigious, and the difference is of infinitely more importance than the similarity.

² *Sylvestre Bonnard*, 191.

of austere religious devotion, Nicias, the Epicurean, about to return to his easy pleasures, declares that their paths are not dissimilar: "We are acting in obedience to the same sentiment," he says, "the sole spring of all human action: each is seeking his form of voluptuousness, with the same end in view: happiness, impossible happiness!"¹

The voluptuousness of religious emotion is a frequently recurring theme in the novels and in the *Vie littéraire*, but we are aware of a very unusual note in France's treatment of this idea.

"Villiers de l'Isle-Adam was," he says, "of that family of literary neo-Catholics of whom Chateaubriand is the common father. . . . They enjoyed above all in religion the charms of sin, the grandeur of sacrilege, and their sensuality caressed the dogmas which added to voluptuousness the supreme voluptuousness of damning themselves."²

"The hymns sung by the Christians expressed the delights of suffering, and mingled in a triumphal dirge so much joy with so much suffering that Thaïs, as she listened to them, felt the voluptuousness of life and the horror of death flow at the same time through her reawakened senses."³

These two passages offer the key, I think, to the understanding of that exceptional view of the relation of sensuality to religion which is peculiar to France and other writers of his type, ancient and modern. Whatever voluptuousness there may be in religious emotion has been generally related to the ecstatic frenzy of one who feels himself on the point of absorption into the infinite. I doubt whether one will find anywhere so clearly expressed as in the works of Anatole France the idea that the voluptuousness of religious emotion is associated with the "charms of sin, the grandeur

¹ *Thaïs*, 239.

² *Vie littéraire*, III, 121; and compare *ibid.*, 199.

³ *Thaïs*, 128.

of sacrilege," and compounded of the "voluptuousness of life and the horror of death."

In general, for France, the sensual power of religion resides in the strengthening of human passions through the very act of condemning them. "Christianity," he says, "has done much for love by making it a sin. . . . There are in these little works of childlike theology a thousand tales . . . which attach too much price to purity not to render voluptuousness at the same time infinitely precious." Women should lament the decreasing power of Christianity, for as religion and faith disappear from the earth, love will cease to be a sin, and woman's domination over man will be gone forever.¹ "Passion makes its delight of anguish and of disquietude. Even religions have been unable to withstand it; they have done nothing but offer it an additional voluptuousness, the voluptuousness of remorse."² "Religion offers to voluptuous souls an additional voluptuousness: the voluptuousness of damning oneself."³

France is therefore attracted to Christianity by its sensuality, or, more precisely, by the sensuality of religiosity—that is, of Romantic or hysterical religious ecstasy—and, further, by the added voluptuous charm which religion gives to sinful love by solemnly forbidding it.

I have already expressed the opinion that his joy in the sensuality of suffering was incompatible with his pagan view of life.

¹ *Jardin d'Epicure*, 10 ff.

² *Vie littéraire*, I, 346.

³ *Génie latin*, 168. Compare: "The songs, the incense, the flowers, the pious images—all that which confuses and induces to prayer—softened his soul. . . . All that in religion which gives love the attraction of forbidden fruit awakened a powerful interest in him. An atheist, he loved the God of Mary Magdalen and savored the religion which has given lovers an additional voluptuousness, the voluptuousness of damning themselves." *Désirs de Jean Servien*, 180.

"Suffering and love," he says, "are the twin sources of the earth's inexhaustible beauty. Suffering—what an unrecognized divinity! We owe to it all that is good in us, all that gives worth to life; we owe to it pity, we owe to it courage, we owe to it all virtues";¹ and:

"I have just read a book in which a poet-philosopher shows man exempt from joy, sorrow, and curiosity. When you come out of that new Utopia and see around you men struggling, loving, suffering, how you begin to love them, and how glad you are to suffer with them! How fully you feel that there and there only is true joy!"²

True joy is in suffering. This recalls that praise of suffering which we find in much Christian literature of the Middle Ages, but it is more closely allied to a pseudo-Manichean tendency distinctly noticeable in the nineteenth century. It is akin also to that revelling in grief which has appeared sporadically in the medieval and modern worlds—in the modern world most conspicuously in such men as Chateaubriand and Byron; and France follows the Romanticists in recognizing such delight in sorrow as a form of sensuality. By an unwarrantable confusion of the orthodox medieval attitude and of the Romantic attitude, he is capable of describing St. Francis of Assisi as sensual:

"Epicurus," he says—and, as usual with his favorite passages, he repeats this several times—"and St. Francis of Assisi are the two best friends suffering humanity has yet met in its uncertain wanderings. Epicurus freed men from vain terrors, and taught them to render the idea of happiness proportionate to their wretched nature, and to their slight strength. Good St. Francis, *more tender and more sensual*, led them to felicity by dreams hidden in the breast and wished that, following his example, their souls might expand with joy in the depth of an enchanted solitude. They

¹ *Jardin d'Epicure*, 55.

² *Ibid.*, 61–62.

were beneficent, both of them, Epicurus and St. Francis, the one in destroying deceptive illusions, the other in creating illusions from which there is no awakening.”¹

In a passage of the *Vie littéraire*² France magnificently expresses his sense of human suffering:

“In the midst of the eternal illusion which envelops us, one thing alone is certain—suffering. It is the corner-stone of life. On it humanity is established as on an immovable rock. Beyond suffering all is uncertainty. It is the sole witness to a reality which escapes us. We know that we suffer and we know nothing else. It is the base on which man has erected everything. Yes, it is on the burning granite of grief that man has solidly founded love and courage, heroism and pity, and the choir of august laws, and the procession of virtues, terrible or charming. Were that foundation to fail, these beautiful figures would sink all together into the abyss of nothingness. Humanity is obscurely conscious of the necessity of grief. It has placed pious sadness among the virtues of its saints. Happy those who suffer, and woe to the happy! For having uttered that cry the Gospel has reigned for two thousand years upon the earth.”

There is little that represents the real France, the pagan France, in this elevation of the doctrine of suffering. His cult of sorrow is not really Christian though he borrows the language of Christianity. It is an expression of his fundamental sensuality, akin to his cult of beauty and passion. And it is only superficial, for there is something in suffering besides voluptuous exultation in its pain; and, though suffering may be a continuous joy to a medieval ascetic whose pain has some other reward than the sensual stimulus it entails, it cannot, except at moments, appeal to a hedonist of the nineteenth century.

We are not surprised to discover, therefore, that France is repelled by the Christian exaltation of sorrow far more

¹ *Opinions de Jérôme Coignard*, 12–13.

² I, 335.

than he is attracted. In every period of his life he esteemed less highly the religion of Jesus than the religion of Greece, which "was only the amusement of its incredulity. That is why it remained human and beneficent." ¹

"Whence, Arcade," asks the venerable sage Nectaire, "came that unique prodigy of wisdom and beauty upon the earth? Why did the sacred soil of Ionia and Attica nourish that incomparable flower? Because there was in that land neither sacerdocy, nor dogma, nor revelation, and because the Greeks never knew the jealous god. It is of his own genius, his own beauty, that the Hellene made his gods, and when he raised his eyes to heaven, he found there his own image." ²

France's resentment against the religion which, unlike the kindly pagan cult, takes young girls from men and gives them to a heavenly spouse was expressed in his early work with melancholy suavity. In the *Noces corinthiennes*, Daphne, an Atala of the first century, is torn from her beloved by the insensate vow of a converted mother, and to the sounds of the "Hymen, Hymen" of an earthly epithalamium, consecrates herself hopelessly and helplessly to Christ. The notes of the nuptial song die in the distance as the girl, having fulfilled her sacrifice, drops her marriage ring into the fountain of the nymphs with the heart-broken cry: "Rejoice, thou God of sorrows, who lovest suffering." ³ The preface to this dramatic poem expresses clearly its purpose: "Hellas, maiden, player of the lyre! . . . O daughter of the sea . . . thy breast cherished the beauty of voluptuousness. . . . A jealous God on the broken temple pavement loosed thy white knees. . . . Grace and beauty perished with thee. . . . I have celebrated thee . . . that those who read these writ-

¹ *Vie littéraire*, I, 344.

² *Révolte des Anges*, 211.

³ *Poésies*, 157.

ten words may love life more, and be gentle to lovers.”¹

France ended his literary career with unrestrained mockery of that Christianity which set itself against the antique Venus; and at the last did not conceal his detestation of the Church as the “ancient exterminator of all thought, all knowledge, and all joy”²—especially of all joy. He imagines Virgil refusing an invitation to enter the paradise of the Christians in these terms:

“To fear pleasure and flee from voluptuousness would have seemed to me the most abject outrage that could be inflicted on nature. I am assured that during their life some of the elect of your god abstained from nourishment, and fled from women out of love for privation, and exposed themselves voluntarily to useless suffering. I should fear to meet these criminals, whose frenzy strikes me with horror.”³

Renan, says France, had “a very highly developed religious sense.”⁴ There is little satisfactory evidence that France himself ever experienced any real religious feeling. He was attracted by the aesthetic charm of Christianity, by the sensuality he discovered in its cult of sorrow, and by the added voluptuousness which it lent sin by condemning it. He was thus drawn to religion; but he was repelled much more emphatically, for, despite all his efforts to make it the ally of sensuality, he found it to be the uncompromising enemy of all voluptuaries. He rebelled against Christianity for the same reason that induced Laeta Acilia⁵ finally to reject the God of Mary Magdalen: it forbids human joys; and it is the cause of that “deplorable misunderstanding which eight-

¹ *Poésies*, 129–131.

² *Vers les Temps meilleurs*, II, 78. He is reported to have said at the very end of his life: “There is one thing for which I have never been able to forgive God—suffering.” Ergère in *Illustration*, October 18. 1924

³ *Ile des Pingouins*, 150.

⁴ *Vie littéraire*, I, 323.

⁵ See *Balthasar*.

een centuries ago set humanity at variance with nature." ¹ "God," he concludes finally, "is envious, stupid, wicked, an enemy of joy and love." ²

5

Sensuality is so clearly the essential element in France's being that it determines the character of his art and the nature of his thought. Critics agree in ascribing to him what may seem to be a dubious and uncertain gift: "voluptuous intelligence." Thought, we are accustomed to imagine, is a rational rather than a sensuous process; and it is usually supposed that an intellectuality based directly on sense rather than on mind is likely to prove fallacious, however enticing. "It is true," says Mr. Turquet-Milnes, "that France sometimes seems to attach so little value to his ideas that we realize he loves them for their charm rather than for the truth they may contain. His voluptuous intellectualism, product of a sinuous mobile soul, plays around ideas." Commentators, French as well as foreign, support this statement, which seems to me quite justified. Mr. James Branch Cabell, whose sympathetic understanding of France is amply evident from his own works, in his preface to the English translation of the *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque* ³ aptly expresses the same idea. "The characters," he says, "between assignations and combats, toy amorously with ideas."

¹ *Histoire comique*, 7. With the revival of paganism at the time of the Renaissance, men "became reconciled with nature; they trampled under foot vain terrors and raised their eyes to heaven without fear of reading there, as formerly, signs of wrath and menaces of damnation." *Ile des Pingouins*, 159.

² *Dieux ont Soif*, 278. Jehovah was "stupid, ferocious, ignorant, cruel, gross, foul-mouthed, the most foolish and wicked of gods." *Sur la Pierre blanche*, 171-172.

³ And again in *Straws and Prayer-Books*, 140.

France himself supplies frequent corroboration of the generally accepted opinion that to him mental effort is to a quite unusual degree a form of sensuality, a "voluptuous intellectualism." The Abbé Coignard, for instance, finds a certain "sensual charm" in deciphering the papyrus manuscript containing the abstruse lucubrations of Zosimus of Panopolis.¹ Many an artist of the late nineteenth century agreed with the Abbé. George Moore, for instance, declared: "With me, literature is a question of sense, intellectual sense, if you will, but sense all the same, and ruled by the same caprices—those of the flesh."

6

Serious souls are likely to find it difficult to enjoy without some misgivings the light-heartedness of a great master toying with the most momentous problems which confront a distracted age. But France did not write for serious souls. No imputation did he resent more energetically than the accusation that he was serious and that he wrote for serious souls, except when in his last years he was acting in the capacity of socialistic propagandist. He was a dilettante, and prided himself on the fact.

The dilettante is the *honnête homme qui ne se pique de rien* of the seventeenth century—without his seriousness. Not only does Anatole France toy with ideas; he toys with art too, and with life (except in so far as it is sensual), and that is why he is numbered with the dilettantes rather than with the artists who see in ideas and life and art something more than matter for elegant and subtle trifling.

Such artists, France would say, take things much too seriously. He himself was one of those "sinuous and fluctuat-

¹ *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque*, 210.

ing souls who can amuse others with the errors with which they amuse themselves." ¹

"It is amusing," he says, "for the curious soul to live in a time like this when one can compare the little David of M. Ernest Renan in his *burnous* with the majestic David which the sculptor of the thirteenth century shows us pensive in his white beard, under his heavy crown, and holding between his fingers the prophetic lyre.

"Yes . . . it is interesting and sweet to live in a time when science and poetry each has its place; since a generous critical attitude shows us everything at once in a marvelous fashion, both the bud of reality, full of sap, and the full-blown flower of legend." ²

So life and all its problems are for the "curious soul" not matters of serious concern, but an interesting source of amusement; thus they appeared to Nicias and to Brotteaux des Ilettes. At the end of the *Ile des Pingouins* France describes the destruction of Paris by Clair, a humanitarian chemist. Just before the work of destruction begins, Caroline, his sweetheart, asks Clair: "Do you think men were happy in earlier ages?" And he replied: "They suffered less when they were younger. They acted like yonder little boy: they played; they played at arts, at virtues, at vices, at heroism, at beliefs, at voluptuousness; they had illusions which diverted them. They made noise; they amused themselves. But now . . ." ³

Now they had become serious. So France destroys them.

7

The doctrine that intellectualism is a form of sensuality will be readily welcomed by those who agree with France

¹ *Vie littéraire*, II, iii.

² *Ibid.*, I, 327-328.

³ *Ile des Pingouins*, 403-404.

that thought is futile where it is not baneful, that truth and happiness can be attained only through the senses. This attitude toward the comparative importance of reason and feeling is so consistently held by him that it finds expression in the work of every period of his long life.

He detested Rousseau because the latter believed in human virtue and in the perfectibility of mankind. But he willingly accepted one side of Rousseauism: confidence in the superiority of instinct, the senses, sentiment, emotion—the superiority of all of these to reason, reflection, intelligence. There was something fresh and engaging, though a little childlike, in the enthusiasm of Rousseau's first disciples. But his latter-day followers' disparagement of reason and elevation of instinct and the senses are, one cannot help feeling, somewhat discolored by all the muddy water of discouragement and disillusion which has flowed under the bridge during the last century of Rousseauistic experiment.

Nicias exhorts Thaïs to entrust herself boldly to the promptings of her senses:

"O my Thaïs," he says, "let us taste of life! We shall have lived much if we have felt much. There is no other intelligence than that of the senses; to love is to understand."¹

"I prefer to feel rather than to understand," France himself declares elsewhere. ". . . I confess this to you, sir, that you may not be disagreeably surprised if my replies are completely lacking in system."²

Instinct alone is reliable. "Reason, proud reason, is capricious and cruel. The holy ingenuity of instinct never deceives. In instinct is the only truth, the only certainty that humanity can ever grasp in this life of illusions,

¹ *Thaïs*, 125.

² *Vie littéraire*, II, 191–192; compare *Révolte des Anges*, 142.

wherein three-quarters of our ills come from thought.”¹

It is remarkable that all is not well in this world of ours if reason is maleficent, and instinct never deceives, for France teaches us that as a matter of fact we are guided always by instinct and never by deceptive thought:

“We may safely say that anything can be demonstrated by reason except that which we feel to be true. . . . Men must have some inkling of this great truth since they never govern themselves by their reason. Instinct and sentiment lead them. They obey their passions: love, hatred, and especially salutary fear.”²

“One can live without thinking. In fact that’s how we live ordinarily. . . . Peoples live by acts and not by ideas.”³

“Intelligence has far less dominion over the instincts and natural sensations than we are inclined to believe, even in men of great intellectual power, for they are selfish, avaricious, and sensual like the rest of us. . . . So slight are our reactions against our reflex movements that I dare not say there is an intellectual state in human society as opposed to the natural state. . . . In the darkness in which we exist—all of us—the learned man is beating his head against the wall while the ignoramus remains quietly in the middle of his room.”⁴

The ignoramus is therefore the wise man, for in ignorance alone is there happiness: “Ignorance has sweetnesses incomparable”;⁵ “Only in illusion is there joy, and peace is to be found only in ignorance.”⁶ “Ignorance is the necessary condition not only of our happiness but of our very existence,”⁷ while thought and knowledge bring only misery:

¹ *Pierre Nozière*, 145.

² *Jardin d'Epicure*, 213–214.

³ *Vie littéraire*, I, 14.

⁴ *Jardin d'Epicure*, 78–81.

⁵ *Vie littéraire*, III, 68.

⁶ *Puits de Sainte-Claire*, 157.

⁷ *Jardin d'Epicure*, 33.

"We have eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge and there remains in our mouths a taste of ashes."¹ "By the sadness of desolation one must pay for the pride of having thought."² And if we persist in seeking truth by reason we shall but cloud it: the simple folk of the blessed fifteenth century "were seldom in error, and saw the truth which our intelligence conceals from us."³ "It is not by reflection and by intelligence but by feeling that the highest and purest truths are attained."⁴ Some truths may be reached by reason, but they are profitless: "The truths discovered by the intelligence remain sterile. . . . It is by feeling that the seed of good is sown in the world. Reason has no such power. . . . To serve man, one must cast aside all reason as an encumbering baggage, and rise on the wings of enthusiasm. If you reason, you will never fly."⁵ It may be admitted that emotion is the wings of reason by which thoughts, dead if not thus vitalized, are driven

"over the universe

Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!"

But feeling is not to France merely the sustaining and life-bringing force which disseminates thought and renders it fecund,—it is all: if one reasons, one will thereby be prevented from flying.

So reason is not only profitless; it is positively harmful. Although we were assured in the passages I quoted a moment ago that man is never really guided by his thought, but always by a benign instinct, it now appears that he sometimes

¹ *Vie littéraire*, III, 7.

² *Génie latin*, 186.

³ *Lys rouge*, 149.

⁴ *Thaïs*, 175–176.

⁵ *Opinions de Jérôme Coignard*, 288.

tries (perverse creature that he is) to guide himself by reason, and that this exercise of the intellect is the source of all his wretchedness.

Fortunately, intelligence is deprived by its rarity of some of its power to destroy: "Rare as it is to-day and restricted to a small number of despised men, it remains innocent. But make no mistake: it is contrary to the genius of the species. If by a misfortune which there is no reason to fear, it penetrated suddenly into the mass of human beings, it would produce there the effect of a solution of ammonia in an ant-hill. . . . Ignorance and error are necessary to life, like bread and water. Intelligence must be excessively rare and feeble to remain harmless." ¹

But France is willing to grant that if it knows its place and keeps it, reason has a function to perform: it may even be productive of innocent joy: "The Know Thyself of Greek philosophy is an absurdity. We shall never know either ourselves or others. . . . And it is an iniquitous abuse of the intelligence to use it in the search for the truth. Still less can it serve us to judge equitably man and his works. Its proper use is in those games, more complicated than hopscotch or chess, which we call metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics. But where it serves best and most pleasantly is in catching here and there some flash or sparkle of things, and in delighting in this without spoiling the innocent joy by fitting it into a system or by indulging in the mania of judging." ²

All this toying with ideas is a delight to France's readers, very many of whom, paradoxically enough, while realizing that he is merely playing, take him very seriously (despite all his pleas) and speak of him reverently as the sage. There is, to be sure, some truth in everything I have

¹ *Pierre Nozière*, 160-161.

² *Jardin d'Epicure*, 77-78.

quoted—just enough to make it all a very amusing and very absurd tissue of specious sophistries. France of course aims really only to amuse. The advantage which he has over those who treat life seriously is that “of sinuous and fluctuating souls who can amuse others with the errors with which they amuse themselves.”

8

France protests frequently against our taking him seriously. And yet we persist in doing so. We are forced into this anomalous position, somewhat shamefacedly and apologetically, by the fact that he himself, while merely toying with ideas and all the while scoffing at reason and the intellect, has left us a shelf full of books rammed with unhesitating expression of opinion and with what certainly looks like the product of thinking. To ignore his philosophy would therefore be, it seems, to neglect something which must have appeared to him important—just why, it is hard to say.¹

It is surely worth while, in any case, to discover the general trend of his speculations about life, remembering all the while that we are constantly in danger of attaching much weight to what the master intended to be treated, perhaps, as mere unconsidered trifles. I shall not try to make of him a systematic philosopher; one must not look for consistency and order in an author who abhorred both: “The systems built up by the philosophers,” he says, “are nothing but tales invented to amuse the eternal childhood of man.”²

¹ “Whenever he sincerely confessed his preference, it was clearly all for his ‘books of opinion,’ those ‘in which he had been able to express his convictions, to say what he thought.’” Corday, *Dernières Pages inédites d’Anatole France*, 178.

² *Thaïs*, 55.

His general outlook on the world and man is that of one who has tested life and has found it empty where it is not vile: "The substance of human nature does not change, and this substance is harsh, egotistical, jealous, sensual, ferocious";¹ "Perhaps this insignificant planet is spoiled, rotten. . . . We are perhaps only bacilli and vibriones, an object of horror to the universal order."² It has been scientifically demonstrated that "this globe of ours, of which we are so proud, is nothing but a little ball turning awkwardly around a sun of diminishing brilliancy, carrying us like vermin on its moldy surface." This lesson of astronomy calls to mind a similar conclusion reached by Swift in his most vitriolic mood, without the aid of science: men are "the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the face of the earth." Though the superior literary excellence of Swift's convincing force is clearly apparent, one cannot fail to admire the grace with which France clothes his philosophical discovery.³

The life of man, we are not surprised to find, is hardly enviable:

"I am not sure that this world is the worst world possible. I believe that to grant it excellence even in evil is to flatter it. We can imagine very little about the other worlds. . . . We know only that Venus and Mars are much like the earth. This similarity alone is enough to justify our believing that evil reigns there as it does here and that the earth is only one of the provinces of evil's vast empire. . . . There is no justification for the illusion that the stars illumine planets that are happier than ours. The stars resemble our sun too much for that. . . . The analysis of

¹ *Vie littéraire*, IV, 48; compare the passage from the *Opinions de Jérôme Coignard*, 106, quoted below, p. 142. "Men are . . . egotistical, avaricious, cowardly and cruel, stupid and mad by turns."

² *Vie littéraire*, IV, 229.

³ Compare Voltaire's version: "[Zadig] conceived men as they are in fact, insects devouring one another on a little atom of mud."

their light shows that the substances burning on their surfaces are the same as those which move on that heavenly body which since man has existed has given light and warmth to his misery, his folly, and his sorrow. This analogy is enough to disgust me with the universe. . . . I feel that we live in a phantasmagoria and that our view of the universe is nothing but the effect of the nightmare of the wretched sleep which we call life. And that is the worst of it, for it is clear that we cannot know anything, that everything deceives us, and that nature makes cruel mock of our ignorance and of our imbecility.”¹

Living is really an odious farce:

“It is the strength and beneficence of religion that it teaches man the reason and end of his existence. When we have rejected the dogmas of moral theology, as most of us have in this age of science and of intellectual liberty, there remain no means of knowing why we are on this earth and what we have come to do here. The mystery of destiny envelops us entirely, and we must avoid thinking in order not to be cruelly conscious of the tragic absurdity of living. . . . In a world where the fires of faith are extinguished, evil and suffering lose their very meaning and seem only odious jests and sinister farces.”¹

Few men of the last two generations, be it said incidentally, have urged us more constantly than Anatole France to escape seeing life as it is by avoiding thinking; and few have set more seriously to work than he to extinguish the fires of our faith, both in God and in man.

Sometimes it seems to France that we are improving—but very slowly; it would take thousands of years to make the improvement perceptible to the naked eye. But even this slow improvement is vain, for we shall end where we began: “The human species is not susceptible of infinite progress. . . . There was a time when our planet was not suitable for human life. . . . The time will come when it will be no

¹ *Jardin d'Epicure*, 81–85, 66–67.

longer suitable. . . . When the sun is extinguished, and it will be eventually, men will have long since disappeared. The last will be as naked and stupid as the first.”¹

Such is man's destiny. Such is the futility of life. We are adrift on a sea of relativity, carried aimlessly, helplessly, stupidly by the eternal flux. It was among the old books of the quais, France says, that he “was gradually penetrated with the sanest of philosophies.” “Thumbing the worm-eaten books,” he continues, “I became profoundly conscious, even as a child, of the transitoriness of things and of the nothingness of all. I divined that men were only changing images in the universal illusion.”²

Such, then, is the thought of Anatole France in its general trend: man is a sensual, ferocious animal; life is a wretched sleep, during which nature makes cruel mock of our ignorance and of our imbecility; living is a tragic absurdity.

All of the thoughts quoted above France expresses again and again. There is nothing new in them as ideas, but what of that? “An idea,” he says, “gets its value exclusively from the form in which it is expressed. To give a new form to an old idea is all there is in art and the only creation possible to humanity.”³ The ideas here quoted are old; the form is new: in the nonchalance with which they are idly and dispassionately dropped here and there, apropos or not, into the pages of a score of volumes, we recognize the superb indifference and amiable finality of tone of the dilettante; in the grace of utterance we detect the presence of the consummate aesthete.

¹ *Jardin d'Epicure*, 24; compare the end of the *Ile des Pingouins*, of *Sur la Pierre blanche*, and of the *Révolte des Anges* for evidence that he maintained this view throughout his life.

² *Livre de mon Ami*, 159-160.

³ *Vie littéraire*, IV, 163.

Such being France's conception of man and his works, it is quite natural that he should scorn reason. Human nature has not changed materially since the day when we lived in caves, society is abominable because man created it, and the possibility of improvement is hardly worthy of consideration. If all this is true, reason has indeed proved to be a broken reed and may well be discarded without more compunction than France displayed when he cast aside that other broken reed, faith. For reason is a means to an end: to make this a better world, or at least to prevent it from becoming worse; and if it does not serve that purpose, it may as well rust unused.

Reason has immemorially been thought of as that one of the human faculties which is of most utility in the pursuit of wisdom. Wisdom is, in relation to the individual, the pursuit of perfection (which gleams farther and farther distant in proportion as it is approached); and, in relation to mankind as a whole, it is the quest of a better world. Reason has been considered one of the surest roads to virtue. One may claim very little for the virtue of mortal man; one may recognize that virtue is, like wisdom, an evanescent will-o'-the-wisp—not a lamp at all, but at best a firefly, glimmering fitfully over our terrestrial miasma—and still seem to Anatole France a naïve optimist, a veritable Pangloss.

"*Candide* was thrown together in three days for immortality," he says;¹ and Diderot, "a contemporary of Voltaire and of Rousseau, was the best of men in the best of centuries."² Voltaire and Diderot were the great men who appealed to him out of the large number who flourished in

¹ *Vie littéraire*, I, 53.

² *Vers les Temps meilleurs*, I, 45.

the "best of centuries." For one master of that century he had little affection—the one who believed not only that man was capable of achieving virtue, but that he was instinctively virtuous. Cadmus, says France, invented the alphabet "not out of love for the human race, nor from a desire of empty fame. He invented it because of a love for money, and with a tangible and certain profit in view. . . . He believed that men are wicked and that the gods, since they are more powerful than men, are worse." ¹

Rousseau thought that society was responsible for whatever deflection man's innate virtue suffered. The Abbé Coignard inverts Rousseau's order of corruption: "he was persuaded that man is naturally a very wicked animal, and that society is abominable only because man expends his genius in creating it." ² France, we have already seen, accepts the Rousseauistic doctrine of the supremacy of instinct; he does justice to Rousseau's "enchanting eloquence," and to the "new sentiment of love and pity" which sprang from him; but is convinced that his ideas were "the falsest and most baneful that ever man held in regard to nature and society." ³

"Nothing resembles the philosophy of Rousseau less than that of M. l'Abbé Coignard. . . . Rousseau's doctrine is based on the imaginary foundations of the original goodness of man. . . . It reduces man to the status of the monkey, and is unreasonably angry when it sees that the monkey is not virtuous. In this it is absurd and cruel, as became apparent when statesmen tried to apply the *Social Contract* to the best of republics. . . . Robespierre venerated the memory of Rousseau. He would have thought the Abbé Coignard a very bad man. . . . Robespierre was an optimist who believed in virtue. Statesmen of that stamp do all

¹ *Jardin d'Epicure*, 183–184.

² *Opinions de Jérôme Coignard*, 23.

³ *Vie littéraire*, I, 88.

the harm possible. He who undertakes to guide men must never lose sight of the fact that they are malicious monkeys. . . . The folly of the Revolution was in aiming to establish virtue on the earth. When you want to make men good and wise, free, moderate, generous, you are led inevitably to the desire of killing them all. Robespierre believed in virtue: he instituted the Terror. Marat believed in justice: he demanded two hundred thousand heads. Of all the men of the eighteenth century, M. l'Abbé Coignard was perhaps the one whose principles were the most antagonistic to those of the Revolution. He would not have signed a line of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, because of the excessive and iniquitous distinction that is established in it between man and the gorilla."¹

Such is France's opinion as to the attainability and value of virtue in 1893, in the full tide of his skeptical, anti-revolutionary vigor. Much later, after his conversion to socialism, in one of his last works, the *Dieux ont Soif* (1912), he returns to the attack upon Rousseauism. Evariste Gamelin was a Rousseauist. "Virtue," says he, "is natural to man: God has implanted the germ of it in the heart of human beings." Old Brotteaux, the epicurean voluptuary, who is certainly no other than France himself, retorts:

"Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who had some talent, especially in music, was a *Jean-Fesse* who pretended to get his ethics from nature but got it in reality from the principles of Calvin. Nature teaches us to devour one another, and sets the example for all the crimes and all the vices which the state of society corrects or dissimulates. We ought to love virtue, but it is good to know that it is merely an expedient imagined by men in order that they may live comfortably together. What we call ethics is nothing but a desperate enterprise of our fellow men against the universal order, which is built on struggle, carnage, and the blind play of contrary forces. Ethics is its own destroyer, and the more I think about the matter, the more I am persuaded that the universe is mad. The theologians and the philosophers who make God the

¹ *Opinions de Jérôme Coignard*, 24-26.

author of nature and the architect of the universe make him appear to us absurd and wicked. They say he is good because they are afraid of him, but they are forced to agree that his way of acting is atrocious. They ascribe to him a malignity rare even among men. And that is how they make him worthy of adoration on the earth. For our miserable race would not worship just and benevolent gods from whom it would have nothing to fear. . . . Without purgatory and hell *le bon Dieu* would be only *un pauvre sire*.”¹

Thus, believing that virtue is not inherent in man, and not an attribute of God, France rejects a whole side of Rousseauism. And he rejects, too, every means of acquiring virtue, from Christianity to Stoicism.

It was inevitable that France should pursue Stoicism with the same earnestness that characterized his attack upon reason. For if the Stoic ideal is sound, human reason is not so paltry a thing as it appeared to him. The struggle to achieve self-mastery, which is the heart and soul of Stoicism, offended the sense of fitness of his dilettante spirit and prompted such raillery as this: “The frog who swells out in order to become as large as the ox accomplishes the masterpiece of Stoicism.”² Further, though “there was a long interval between Stoic pride and Christian humility,” yet “the ethics of Seneca, by its sadness and its scorn of nature, prepared the way for the ethics of the gospels. The Stoics were at variance with life and beauty.”³ Stoicism repels France for the same reason that religion found no favor in his eye: it was “at variance with life and beauty”; in other words, it was disrespectful of the claims of sensuality. Of the Emperor Julian he says: “One is surprised by the number of ideas which this enemy of the Christians has in common with the Stoics. Like them he is monotheistic; like

¹ *Dieux ont Soif*, 88-89; compare 276.

² *Thaïs*, 170.

³ *Sur la Pierre blanche*, 176.

them he believes in the merit of abstinence, fasting, and mortification of the flesh; like them he despises carnal pleasures, and thinks he is rendering himself pleasing to the gods by approaching no woman.”¹

France rejects Stoicism and Christianity, two of the most adequate approaches to virtue yet devised by man—the one by way of reason and humanistic insight, the other by way of humility and obedience—because pleasure, that is, sensual pleasure, and, secondarily, aesthetic pleasure, is to him the only imaginable aim of existence: “The citizen Brotteaux made of the quest of pleasure the single aim of his life. He considered that reason and the senses, sole judges in the absence of the gods, could not conceive any other.” So he continued to read his beloved Lucretius, “not however without casting a glance at the golden neck of his pretty neighbor, nor without breathing voluptuously the odor which rose from the moist skin of that little slattern.”² Ignorance and desire—these are the virtues which France prefers to the reason and self-control of the humanist, and to the obedience of the Christian: “the two virtues which render life endurable—ignorance and desire.”³

France’s philosophy is the philosophy of the voluptuary—of the refined voluptuary, he believed. He is an aesthete as well as a voluptuary; but apparently, as I intimated above, he was not both at the same time, or at any rate he seems frequently to forget that “the sense of the beautiful guides” him when his easily roused sensuality is stirred. His philosophy of life is that of the voluptuary and aesthete—and sometimes of the voluptuary alone.

¹ *Sur la Pierre blanche*.

² *Dieux ont Soif*, 90–91.

³ *Vie littéraire*, III, 211. The reason which Brotteaux mentions once or twice, as in the passage quoted above, is not the reason of the humanist. It hardly seems, in fact, to deserve the name reason at all.

France's aesthetic sense is not always strong enough to save him from the ugliness of Zola when that sensuality which dominated his life was awakened in him; but it guided him to an appreciation of beauty in art which is rare today.

The aim of the nineteenth century aesthete was not only to write beautifully but to make a fine art of life itself. And yet there is apparent in Anatole France, as in some English followers of Pater, a strange separation between theory and practise in respect to the cult of beauty. One would suppose that naturalism and aestheticism were irreconcilable enemies. France indeed never tires of assailing Zola and his kind. But he, like George Moore,¹ for instance, readily falls into a view of life and a practise of art which are hardly distinguishable in effect from the naturalistic. The reason, I think, is clear. The aesthete finds the basis of both art and life in the senses exclusively. He derides reason, he mocks at religious or humanistic efforts to control the passions, he regards life as well as art (if we judge from the life depicted in his work) as a series of sensations.

He draws away from life, for life is of course very much

¹ The naturalistic tendency of his disciples distressed Pater. "When Mr. Moore sent Pater a realistic story in the hope that he would review it, he received, by way of reply, only a reproof. 'Descriptions of violent incidents and abnormal states of mind,' said Pater, 'do not serve the purpose of art. The object of art is to help us to forget the crude and the violent, to lead us towards certain normal aspects of nature.' To another friend, Pater said: 'The perfection of culture is not rebellion, but peace.'" T. Wright, *Life of Walter Pater*, II, 96. Pater wrote Moore a letter in regard to the *Confessions of a Young Man*, which the latter printed at the head of one of the editions of the book. It contains this sentence: "And still I wonder how much you may be losing, both for yourself and for your writings, by what, in spite of its gaiety and good-nature and genuine sense of the beauty of many things, I must still call a cynical, and therefore exclusive, way of looking at the world. You call it only 'realistic.' Still!"

more than a succession of sensations. His purpose is in fact to escape from life into some sublimer ether. Arthur Symons outlines the aesthete's program as follows:

"A man who goes through a day without some fine emotion has wasted his day, whatever he has gained by it. And it is so easy to go through day after day, busily and agreeably, without really living for a single instant. Art begins when a man wishes to immortalise the most vivid moment he has ever lived. Life has already, to one not an artist, become art in that moment. And the making of one's life into art is after all the first duty and privilege of every man. It is to escape from material reality into whatever form of ecstasy is our own form of spiritual existence."¹

It is doubtful if any great writer or any worthy reader ever looked upon art as a means of escape from life. The aesthete's effort to separate art and life seems absurd and mischievous. It seems absurd because, until death brings release, no man can escape from life for more than a brief period, and this a period which must be followed by a speedy and painful return to reality; it seems mischievous because art degenerates whenever it ignores life.

The aesthete in his cult of beauty in life sees only the life of the senses. There is no necessary reason why this should be so, but it is true in the case of almost all who are of the school. Life offers other types of beauty. These the aesthete does not esteem because they ordinarily presuppose an organization of experience by means of faith or reason; and life to him is not susceptible of such an organization, it is a flux of phenomena and a succession of detached sensations. He therefore is inclined, in his literary productions, to restrict his attention (through choice, not necessity) to such beauty in life as manifests itself in sensuality.

¹ *Studies in Prose and Verse*, 290-291.

The naturalist too finds sensuality at the root of all things. I am judging him by his works, not by his theory, for naturalism, like aestheticism, is capable of a far wider extension than it enjoys in the hands of the greater number of its representatives. The aesthete and the naturalist ought still to remain far removed from each other, since the aesthete aims to evade life, and, in theory, cultivates sensuality because of its association with beauty, while the naturalist fixes his eyes on life and does not aim to distinguish between the beautiful and the ugly in sensuality. And yet, as we have seen, such an aesthete as Anatole France may prove indifferent to beauty when sensuality stirs him. Voluptuousness is roused in the characters whom he creates about as easily and indiscriminately as in those who people the works of the naturalists. It is true that he never adopts the scientific pretensions of Zola's school,¹ and that he never fails in his cult of literary beauty, but aside from these two differences it is difficult to see any essential unlikeness between him and them in the treatment of sensuality. One cannot help comparing the indifference to beauty of France the sensualist with the sensitiveness of Rousseau when one day in Venice he was advised by the ravishing Zulietta to make of himself a mathematician: *Zanetto, lascia le donne, e studia la matematica*. Over against France's youthful predilection for shop-girls, referred to above (p. 46), may be set Rousseau's preference as he states it in his *Confessions*:

¹ His early story *Jocaste*, however, is built up against a background of pseudo-science. In it the young surgeon Longuemare startles and amuses Hélène by emitting such declarations as the following, which undigested reading of Taine, Darwin, and others had rendered popular half a century ago: "Men are descended from monkeys;" "Virtue is a product such as phosphorus and vitriol;" "Heroism and holiness are the effect of cerebral congestion. It is general paralysis and nothing else that makes great men." *Jocaste et le Chat maigre*, 38.

"Seamstresses and chambermaids tempted me little; I had to have ladies."

The aesthetic code with all its merits, especially as one finds it in the life and work of such a man as Pater, has fallen into deserved disrepute, among other reasons because its appreciation of beauty is in many cases not sincere or profound enough to preserve it from the acceptance of ugliness when seasoned by sensuality. The growth of the aesthetic sensualist's indifference to beauty is so gradual that he himself is doubtless rarely aware of it. If any one of the friends of Anatole France ever pointed out to him the wide gulf between the relatively innocent paganism of his early work and the general air of ugliness as well as unsavoriness in his last half dozen volumes, the master was doubtless somewhat surprised. He was probably amused, too, since in his modesty he had never considered himself superior to other men, and other men had seemed to him, as every reader knows, what they seemed to his fellow-aesthete and contemporary, George Moore. "Humanity," says Moore, in words which France would have been heartily willing to subscribe to, "is a pigsty, where liars, hypocrites, and the obscene in spirit congregate; it has been so since the great Jew conceived it, and it will be so till the end."

"The artist must love life," says France, "and show us that it is beautiful. But for him, we should have some doubt about it."¹ France himself loved life tenaciously, like his Larive-du-Mont and his Brotteaux. As an artist, he was bound, according to his theory, to show us that it is beautiful. But surely nobody who has gone through the books he wrote after 1889 can have acquired from them the impression that life is beautiful, or even that it is en-

¹ *Jardin d'Epicure*, 33.

durable, except for the transitory sensual pleasures which it offers.

It may be that France considered the life of his *Lys rouge* or of his *Histoire comique* beautiful because the books which reveal it are graced by an enchanting style. Some aesthetes feel that an ugly action may be rendered beautiful in art by beauty of expression. In this they are supported by their master, Pater, who understood by poetry "all literary production which attains the power of giving pleasure by its form as distinct from its matter." It is doubtful if form and matter can be separated thus: they are closely linked and neither, it seems, can be ugly without detracting from the beauty of the other. The doctrine of the aesthetes that any action, however ugly in itself, may become artistic if expressed beautifully, calls to mind Hedda Gabler's admonition to the poor fool to whom she was handing a brace of pistols wherewith to blow out his brains: "Do it beautifully!" In the life of the *Lys rouge* and of the *Histoire comique* there is something sordid which, one is inclined to feel, no wizardry of words can render really beautiful, just as it is difficult to imagine how one can blow out one's brains aesthetically.

All life is not beautiful and there is a place in art for ugliness; but the writer who renders life distasteful by showing us that it is predominantly ugly and by assuring us that it is vile, hardly fulfills the purpose of the aesthete who declares that "the artist must . . . show us that it is beautiful." The confusion in France's case is generally found in aesthetes: they separate art from life and live with it, after having made of it something removed from general human experience. Then, returning from art to life, they try to make life what they have made art, that is, something unreal, exclusive. The means they adopt is the fastidious cult

of beauty and sensation. Sensation, translated from the sphere of art to the sphere of life (the two having become unnaturally confounded after they had been unnaturally sundered), is almost inevitably narrowed to sensuality. The sensuality which has no more efficacious defense against decadence than the sense of the beautiful degenerates into grossness, and all discrimination of beautiful and ugly is rendered nugatory by the extension of the former to include the latter. Thus it is that a great aesthete may make life seem ugly and vile, as naturalists habitually do, and yet assert that "the artist must . . . show us that it is beautiful"—without being aware of the inconsistency.

11

I have already spoken of the sensual quality which France finds in intellectual effort:

"Why are you translating Zosimus?" asked M. d'Anquetil.

"If you care to know the truth," answered the Abbé Coignard, "it's because I find in the task a certain sensuality."¹

The sensuality referred to by the good Abbé was that intellectual curiosity which in him and his creator, and very conspicuously in his creator's masters, Sainte-Beuve and Renan, was the companion of a powerful emotional curiosity. The two forms of curiosity seemed to all four the same in essence—different faces of one activity. Sainte-Beuve, says Faguet, had "a boundless intellectual curiosity and a terrible sentimental curiosity."²

¹ *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque*, 210.

² *Politiques et Moralistes*, III, 186. It is his impressionistic theory of criticism, which has its source, in large part, in a certain type of curiosity, that France shows most clearly the great influence that Sainte-Beuve exercised over him. "Every critic," says Sainte-Beuve, "draws his own portrait in his work, either in profile or three-quarters." *Causeries du Lundi*, XI, 465.

I doubt whether in our Anglo-Saxon world it would be possible, without French influence, to arrive at a recognition of the similarity in nature between the "boundless intellectual curiosity" of Sainte-Beuve and Anatole France and their "terrible sentimental curiosity"; nor could we, without French influence, conceive of a "voluptuous intelligence." So fearful are we of confounding the sex impulse with other forms of sense activity that we have made an effort, not entirely successful, to distinguish between sensuousness and sensuality. And we have not generally followed the French in making the words "voluptuousness" and "sensuality" include an activity of the mind parallel with that activity of the senses to which we restrict their use: it is only by a half-Anglicized Gallicism that we dare speak of Anatole France's "intellectual sensuality."

"Curiosity," too, is a broader term among the French than with us. Arnold protests energetically against the narrow limits by which this word is circumscribed in England, and establishes therefrom in his usual manner an interesting and valid distinction between the English and the French mind. With the English the word "curiosity," he says, has lost almost completely that sense of delight in the free play of the intellect without ulterior motive which it possesses among the French. With us, as in England, it is rarely used except in detraction; with the French it is used thus frequently, but more commonly it implies approval. The moral turn which we are inclined to give to all problems, even the purely intellectual, forces us to a timid limitation of any process which may seem likely to lead us into danger.

The indispensability of intellectual curiosity is so evident that there is reason to be impatient of the reserves by which it is frequently hedged about even in this day of emancipation. The old fear of thought, symbolized by the tree of

knowledge in the garden of Eden, lives still. The lust of knowledge (*libido sciendi*) was a lust like the lusts of the flesh in the Middle Ages, and later. "Curiosity is but vanity," says Pascal; and his contemporary, Milton, though he was an apostle of intellectual liberty, remains for us one of the outstanding spokesmen of the medieval opinion.¹

Anatole France was aware of the element of truth in the old view: "There is always," he says, "a moment when curiosity becomes a sin, and the devil has always placed himself on the side of the learned."² But he never feared the devil. "At the age of six," he says in one of his autobiographies, "I was already tormented by that great curiosity which was destined to cause the agitation and the joy of my life and to devote me to the quest of what can never be found."³ Like Renan, he felt that "curiosity is perhaps the greatest of man's virtues."⁴

France's curiosity earned him an astounding and varied erudition. Some doubt, to be sure, may be entertained as to the quality of his learning. His reading included the great literary masters of the world, perhaps all of them; but his favorite authors seem to have been the minor ones, the half-forgotten, the unusual, the curious. He resembled Bayle in this respect, and had something in him of the taste of a certain kind of philologist who spends his life laboring over the work of writers who appear to be thought worth reading mainly because they have not been read for a century or so. I would not press this point. France knew the masters, especially Racine. But the authors who are listed in book-catalogues under the heading "Curiosa" or "Facetiae" had a fascination for him such that he must, I

¹ *Paradise Lost*, VIII, 167-178.

² *Jardin d'Epicure*, 68.

³ *Pierre Nozière*, 14.

⁴ *Vie littéraire*, III, 77.

think, have devoted to them a good deal of time which belonged by right of suzerainty to the masters of those who know. In his study of history as well as of literature, he seems to have been primarily in pursuit of anecdotes and of piquant superficialities. The profounder significance of men and events was not the object of his explorations. This view of the nature of his interest in the literature and history of the past is strengthened by the recently published records of his conversation.

It must not be denied that he was a learned man. And yet when one thinks of the general effect produced on many an excellent reader by his two-score volumes—an effect of exquisite futility (a futility redeemed for some by the fact that it is exquisite; and an exquisiteness unsatisfying to others because it is futile)—the old question rises to the mind, why the learned man is not also wise, why learning is so often an idle and useless thing. Montaigne answered the question. He was a sensualist, an epicurean, a dilettante, a disillusioned spectator, a free-thinker, and a skeptic or a pyrrhonist, an adept in the art of curiosity, like Anatole France; and yet when he came to answer the question just raised, he answered it in a way which brings a tolerant and amused smile to the lips of the Francians, for in his answer he uses the words wisdom and virtue! The learned man, he says, makes of knowledge an end in itself; the wise man looks upon knowledge as a means to an end, and that end is wisdom and virtue.

It is true that when Montaigne gave his answer to the old question, he was in the midst of a consideration of the problem of educating the young; and was therefore directly faced with the everlasting difficulty by which fathers (and mothers—his treatise is addressed to a mother) are beset: how can one give direction to the intel-

lectual effort of one's son? Direction presupposes an aim and an end. The education which is without a direction, an aim, and an end is purposeless, and hardly tolerable. Our age, like all ages, is forced to define the purpose of its education, and in that definition we are driven to use the terms wisdom and virtue, both of which—so thoroughly does France represent our period in this respect—raise a smile among some of the most alert of our youth. In vain we attempt to redefine the terms: the scoriae of a dead past cling to them, and our sons are tempted to drive them from their speech.

Wisdom and virtue appear, nevertheless, to be still recognized as the highest aims of all human effort; but there is room for great variation in the definition of the terms. The first purpose of all education, reading, and study seems properly to be precisely this: the definition of these two terms. Most writers and educators, to be sure, recognize the fact, more or less consciously. Anatole France, for instance, recognizes it, but unconsciously; and offers us his definitions. Wisdom, to him, is knowing everything; virtue is, to him, following the instincts with which nature has blessed us: wisdom is curiosity, intellectual sensuality; virtue is emotional curiosity, voluptuousness. Whatever dissatisfaction there may be with France's use of the two words is due to the fact that his definitions are in terms of the mean, not in terms of the end—that they have no reference to purpose. A wide-awake son questions his father constantly and skeptically: What is the good of this? To what is it leading me? The father must find a satisfactory answer, or retract his advice. If we put the boy's questions to Anatole France, the answer is far from satisfactory. His definitions of wisdom and virtue are unacceptable because his intellectual curiosity and his emotional curiosity as well

seem to be purposeless activities leading nowhere. France would retort, as everyone knows, that they lead nowhere because there is nowhere to which they might lead, life being nothing but unintelligible flux. This may be all very well in theory, but it will not do in practise because we must move in some direction as long as we live, whether there is anywhere to go or not, and we want to know in what direction we are moving. "Doubt is all very well," says France himself, "but it does not change the conditions of life."¹

Education, study, reading which satisfies itself with purposeless intellectual activity is not very profitable, as Montaigne insistently declares—however "amusing" it may be to the "curious spirit." There was a time when the dictum "Reading maketh a full man" was much needed, but that time has probably passed. We seem to know too much and to think too little now;—nevertheless, even as I write these words I am tempted to interchange *think* and *know*, for one of our most embarrassing riches to-day is a superfluity of ideas which have only slight basis in facts. So we are driven from pole to pole: the inevitable dilemma of a chaotic age. France is right: chaos reigns among us; but one could wish that he, one of the most "acute and curious spirits" of our time, would offer us help in our difficulties, and not take delight in doubly confounding our confusion.

There can be no doubt that knowledge is indispensable; and curiosity is the condition of knowledge. But knowledge, in one aspect, is nothing but power, and power, unless properly directed, may prove a bane, not a blessing. Knowledge is in itself rather useless (other than as an ornament), or worse, unless it is put in the service of a

¹ *Vie littéraire*, IV, 229.

carefully defined wisdom and of a carefully defined virtue. France's contribution to the twentieth century definition of the terms wisdom and virtue is unsatisfactory; and we are not bound to accept his declaration that a satisfactory definition is impossible in a world of flux, for it has not yet been proved that the doctrine of the flux, which has never been anything more than a plausible theory, is irrefragable. France himself maintains that one man's or a million men's declaration that a thing is so does not make it so. He would have readily admitted, too, I am sure, that one man's or a million men's declaration that there is no solution to a given problem is merely a declaration of his or their ignorance, humble or arrogant as the case may be.

People who must live in the world, and cannot retire with France to pleasant seclusion, are sometimes nettled when he derides them, and declares that illusion is the element out of which they have snatched the definition of their terms. For they do not pretend that they have attained truth, but content themselves necessarily with illusions which are satisfactory in proportion as great thinkers aid in their creation; just as the scientist makes no pretense to absolute certainty and works upon the basis of hypotheses with which his great thinkers provide him. Science is respected to-day in a way in which literature is not, partly because the scientist does not "toy with ideas," and is content to work with hypotheses without making light of them, for he knows that they represent the best that human reason, imagination, and intuitive insight can offer him.

Curiosity is one of the great human virtues. It is the condition of knowledge, as knowledge is the condition of sound conjectures concerning the nature of man and things. But it has its dangers, as have all human virtues. I have suggested that it remains sterile if it is purposeless. It is likely,

too, to degenerate into mere inquisitiveness. There is a noble and a puerile curiosity. France does not distinguish between them. "I shall preserve, I think, all my life," he says, ". . . the disinterested curiosity of little children."¹ The difference between noble curiosity and the "disinterested curiosity of little children" (which few parents would separate from inquisitiveness) is that the latter, unlike the former, does not distinguish between what is important and what is unimportant.²

France's curiosity carries him easily into the by-paths of erudition and of life in search of the unusual and the bizarre. All things seem to him equally worthy of interest, and he is constantly in danger of exalting the secondary into a preëminence which belongs properly to the primary. The discrimination of primary and secondary is of course not a very simple matter, and here we expect guidance from leaders of thought. France does not help us, for to him all things are equally important and equally unimportant. Nothing is really important, but all things are interesting, especially the unusual, bizarre, and rare things, to one who is essentially a dilettante and an intellectual voluptuary.

The reason that France's curiosity leads him in quest of the unusual, bizarre, and rare is that he is quickly satiated by what he possesses. Since he has no central and important philosophy of life, and no real seriousness, he does not pause after he has made an acquisition to assimilate it, and to integrate it with what his mind already possesses, but tastes it

¹ *Livre de mon Ami*, 115.

² "Nothing will remain of what we construct," says France, "and the love of baubles is not more vain than all other loves." *Jardin d'Épîcure*, 126. "M. Anatole France," it has been well said, ". . . is at pains to make us feel that the occupations of his aged savant, M. Sylvestre Bonnard, do not differ in real seriousness from those of M. Trépof, the collector of match-boxes." I. Babbitt, *The Masters of Modern French Criticism*, 289.

and passes on. He delights in this flitting from one excitement to another, "getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time," for "a man who goes through a day without some fine emotion has wasted his day"; and he delights in making art of his sensations. "It is the addition of strangeness to beauty," says Pater, "that constitutes the romantic character in art; and . . . it is the addition of curiosity to this desire of beauty that constitutes the romantic temper. Curiosity and the desire of beauty have each their place in art." But, he adds, "when one's curiosity is in excess, when it overbalances the desire of beauty, then one is liable to value in works of art what is inartistic in them. . . . If there is a great overbalance of curiosity, then we have the grotesque in art."

Pater was not fortunate in his disciples. He sought to "add strangeness to beauty," but with him the curiosity of strangeness was subordinated to the "desire of beauty." His followers were inclined to seek the strange not for what it may add to beauty, but for its strangeness.

A passage from Burke seems worth recalling at this juncture. He recognizes the value of the attractiveness of the strange or the novel, and of curiosity, the pursuit of the novel. "Some degree of novelty," he says, "must be one of the materials in every instrument which works upon the mind; and curiosity blends itself more or less with all our passions." But he insists upon certain restrictions:

"The first and the simplest emotion which we discover in the human mind is curiosity. By curiosity I mean whatever desire we have for, or whatever pleasure we take in, novelty. We see children perpetually running from place to place, to hunt out something new: they catch with great eagerness, and with very little choice, at whatever comes before them; their attention is engaged by everything, because everything has, in that stage of life, the charm of novelty to recommend it. But as those things which

} BURKE

engage us merely by their novelty cannot attach us for any length of time, curiosity is the most superficial of all the affections; it changes its object perpetually, it has an appetite which is very sharp, but very easily satisfied; and it has always an appearance of giddiness, restlessness, and anxiety. Curiosity, from its nature, is a very active principle; it quickly runs over the greatest part of its objects, and soon exhausts the variety which is commonly to be met with in nature; the same things make frequent returns, and they return with less and less of any agreeable effect. In short, the occurrences of life, by the time we come to know it a little, would be incapable of affecting the mind with any other sensations than those of loathing and weariness, if many things were not adapted to affect the mind by means of other powers besides novelty in them, and of other passions besides curiosity in ourselves.”¹

Curiosity is thus a virtue to Burke, but he would not agree with France that it is “perhaps the greatest of man’s virtues.” The power of the appeal of the novel, Burke recognizes also; but he feels that if things affect the mind by means of no other powers besides novelty in them, and of no other passions besides curiosity in ourselves, the result in us can be finally nothing other than “loathing and weariness.” France prided himself on being one of those “children perpetually running from place to place” of whom Burke speaks; his curiosity throughout his life was, he tells us, “the disinterested curiosity of little children.” The resultant disillusion, of which I shall speak in a moment, recalls Burke’s “loathing and weariness.”

I quoted Faguet as declaring that Sainte-Beuve had “a boundless intellectual curiosity and a terrible sentimental curiosity.” Lemaître too speaks of “la curiosité intellectuelle et sentimentale,” which, according to him, is one of the distinguishing marks of the age. (He is writing in 1889,

¹ *An Essay on the Sublime and Beautiful*, I, i.

at the moment when Anatole France is composing *Thaïs*.) This type of curiosity, he says, inevitably proves unsatisfying, and is discarded by the "élite of the younger generation" in favor of the conviction that "life has no meaning except for those who believe and love."¹ The "intellectual and sentimental curiosity" which France shared with his age proved unsatisfying to him, but he clung to it still, and to the disillusion which sprang from it, and did not take refuge in the belief and love of the "élite of the younger generation."

12

The passage from which I have extracted the words "the disinterested curiosity of little children" is one of the best known and most frequently quoted in the works of France:

"I have always been inclined to take life as a spectacle. I have never been a real observer, for observation requires a system to direct it, and I have no system. . . . I was born a spectator and I shall preserve, I think, all my life the ingenuousness of the city loiterers whom everything amuses and who retain, even when they have reached the age of ambition, the disinterested curiosity of little children."²

The epicurean Brotteaux was one of those loiterers. He was "of a sociable disposition and liked amusements," a "philosopher and lover of spectacles."³

"Disinterested" is a favorite word of Arnold's. Curiosity is to him the "disinterested love of a free play of the mind on all subjects, for its own sake. . . . Criticism, real criticism, is essentially the exercise of this very quality. It obeys an instinct prompting it to try to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practise,

¹ *Contemporains*, V, 59.

² *Livre de mon Ami*, 115.

³ *Dieux ont Soif*, 138, 165.

politics, and everything of the kind." Curiosity, criticism, the free play of the mind on all subjects, shows its disinterestedness "by keeping aloof from what is called the practical view of things . . . by steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas, which plenty of people will be sure to attach to them, which perhaps ought often to be attached to them, which in this country at any rate are certain to be attached to them quite sufficiently, but which criticism has really nothing to do with. Its business is, as I have said, simply to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas."

When Arnold says that curiosity is to be cultivated "for its own sake," he exposes himself to misunderstanding, for it is clear from all his work, and from this very essay, that in his opinion it must not only be disinterested, that is, unprejudiced, but must also serve a purpose: to lead to a knowledge of "the best that is known and thought in the world," and "to create a current of true and fresh ideas." The "disinterested curiosity" of Anatole France has no such high aim. Despite all his cultivation of his intelligence, all his erudition, he preserves the ingenuousness of the child or of the city loiterer; and everything amuses him. He is a spectator, a born spectator, and life to him is a spectacle. He glories in the serene and disinterested detachment of the spectator, high up in his ivory tower, in elegant isolation, looking down with some amusement, much tolerant contempt, and a grain of pity upon those of us who elect to take a part in the active life of the world.

"The Abbé Coignard's dearest wish was to show men that their imbecile nature has neither imagined nor created anything that is

worthy of being attacked or defended very passionately, and that if they knew the uncouthness and weakness of their greatest works such as laws or empires, they would fight only playfully and for the pleasure of doing it, like children building sand castles on the shore of the sea.”¹

“Men must know,” says Bacon, in the *Advancement of Learning*, somewhat too drastically condemning the contemplative life as compared with the active, “that in this theatre of life it is reserved only for God and angels to be lookers on.”

13

A certain type of disillusion seems finally to invade all those who would escape from life by treating it as a spectacle; or devote themselves to art for its own sake; or cultivate in themselves only their sensibility—the curiosity of emotional sensuality and of intellectual voluptuousness. There is more than one type of disillusion. Just as there are two kinds of curiosity, the one noble, the other puerile, which are frequently confused as France confused them, so there is a noble disillusion far removed from the inferior type of disillusion, though the two are not always distinguished. Every great writer leaves indelible traces of a lofty disillusion in his work. They are almost as legible in the tragedies of Sophocles as in those of Shakespeare or in the comedies of Molière:

“There’s nothing serious in mortality:
All is but toys.”

Disillusion comes to every man; it is one of the signs of the arrival at maturity. In some men it is the disillusion of Shakespeare, his grief that man’s lot should be harder fre-

¹ *Opinions de Jérôme Coignard*, 20.

quently than he can endure and that in the chaos of our existence no firm ground may be discovered; his conviction that nevertheless man is greater than the blind force which crushes him—a disillusion which increases our respect and admiration and pity for man without concealing his littleness. In some men it is the disillusion of Shakespeare; in others it is the disillusion of Anatole France.

The first source of France's disillusion is an overdeveloped sentimentality.

"As I was just growing out of early childhood at the time," says Sylvestre Bonnard, "I began to become heavier and duller; I lost the charming gift of seeing and of feeling, and things no longer caused me that delicious surprise which is the enchantment of the tenderest age."¹

At the age of thirty-five, looking backward to his youth, France writes:

"I loved life at that time! I had in her the beautiful confidence of a lover, and I did not think that she could ever be severe to me—she who is so exempt from pity!

"I make no accusation against her. She has not inflicted upon me the wounds that she has inflicted upon so many others. She has even sometimes given me a chance caress—with all her indifference! . . . In spite of everything, I have lost hope. . . . No, I have no longer any confidence in my old friend, life. But I love her still."²

No man ever lingered more lovingly than France over the memories of his past life; no man ever resented more deeply the passage of time. We all renounce regretfully the illusions of our youth. Few of us resent the loss as keenly and sentimentally as Anatole France.

Sentimentality is stamped deep upon all his autobiograph-

¹ *Sylvestre Bonnard*, 158.

² *Livre de mon Ami*, 5-6.

ical volumes. The lament for the passage of time, winsomely expressed in these volumes, brings an immediate response from the reader, and awakens his affection for the writer who looks back thus longingly to his youth. But the sentimentalist wears his heart upon his sleeve; and disillusion will visit his sensitive soul.

France's volumes are separable into two strikingly distinct and unlike groups: those in which he is relating the story of his childhood, and those in which he is building upon the experiences of his maturity. The tone of the former is bland and soft; that of the latter is, increasingly as the years pass, cynical and hard. Two almost unrelated writers are represented by his works: the tender and merely regretful sentimentalist living even to the end of his four-score years in the illusions of long ago; and the disillusioned sentimentalist to whom man is usually stupid and generally ferocious. The sentimentalist lives on side by side with the cynic without having any other relation with him than that which exists between irreconcilable antinomies: as a socialist France is fired by the beautiful, unreasoned ardor of Shelley and Hugo; and at the same time he is busy with the *Ile des Pingouins* and the *Dieux ont Soif*.

The mark of the sentimentalist is an unwillingness to face squarely the facts of existence. He averts his gaze from the first truth which impresses itself upon one who looks with unprejudiced eyes upon life, namely, that living without an end in view, without a purpose, will conduct one finally into the slough of helpless disillusion. Blind to the danger, he does not escape the penalty. Detachment is likely to lead to a similar disaster. The spectator who lives only in his senses, does not enter into the stream of human activity, and is merely amused by the spectacle of those who do—who trusts himself to an emotional and intellectual living

from hand to mouth in sensuality and curiosity, with no thought beyond the immediate excitement of a passing sensation—will inevitably find life meaningless in the end.

The amused detachment of the spectator can hardly endure. It did not endure in France's case. The descent from *Sylvestre Bonnard* and the *Livre de mon Ami* to the *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque*, and thence to the *Ile des Pingouins*, the *Dicux ont Soif*, and the *Révolte des Anges* is gradual, but unceasing: the detachment of the dilettante spectator and voluptuary, who finds men amusing as they play at building sand castles by the sea, gives way to the disdain of the cynic. France leaps over the interval in which great writers abide. They find men neither amusing children, nor incorrigible animals, but something between the two; and life is to them neither a romance nor a nightmare.

Most of us escape cynicism by building new illusions to take the place of those that are gone. France too replaced the lost illusions of his youth by new ones, but he was unfortunate in these also. His belief in God passed early. He embraced new religions, but they too, one by one, proved empty, because, with the rest of the world, he asked of them something other than what they had to give. He tried Darwinism, Renan's religion of science ("There are no longer any mysteries for science," declared Berthelot), Taine's determinism, Claude Bernard's experimental philosophy, all science, including the science of history, all philosophy, including the rationalism of the eighteenth century. Rationalism and experiment, the twin giants of the century, led to relativism and flux, the signposts of disillusion. Thus sentimental regret when life has proved to be made of solider stuff than dreams explains only a certain side of France's disillusion; in its more profound aspects it springs from the same root as that of the Romanticists: disappointment at the fail-

ure of a life which had broken away from the traditional bases and could find no abidingly satisfactory new ones. But it took a different course. It did not become "a fever at the core," nor spend itself in "weeping, till sorrow becomes ecstasy," out of both of which moods great poetry, if bad philosophy, arose; it led past pessimism, which, in its highest philosophic form, is capable of generating great literature, to cynicism—and cynicism has created nothing of genuine literary worth.

Life brings to the cynic no compensations for the pain it inflicts. Its rewards, France thought, were to be sought in the pursuit of beauty and sensuality. But he tired of both.

Frank Harris bears witness to the volatility of the master's artistic affections. In the course of his interview with France, the conversation turned to the *objets d'art* which adorned the reception room in profusion:

" 'I'm glad you like Primitives,' I said at hazard. He caught me up quickly.

" 'I detest them now. I used to like them, but now they weary me, mean little to me.'

" 'But they suit the old oak furniture of Henry II that I saw in your dining-room.'

" 'I hate that, too,' he cried. 'I made every mistake a man could make; I loved old oak, old furniture, bought quantities of it, too big for my rooms, suitable only to a castle or a great hall; at length stifled with it I got rid of it all, threw it all out. I have passed through all the fads in furniture and pictures and books.'

" 'Outlived your Corot drawings?' I asked.

" 'Sucked them dry,' he parried, smiling."¹

M. Gsell² speaks of the master's "infinitely capricious sensibility" in artistic matters, and adds: "His preferences changed from year to year, and his interior was modified

¹ *Contemporary Portraits*, First Series, 333.

² P. 12.

according to the book he was engaged in writing." M. Ségur says: "For his pleasure and to divert himself he began to acquire beautiful things, and amassed noble artistic riches. He enjoyed them, but less than people think, and less than he asserted."¹

Thus the sense of beauty in art does not remain consistently potent, or is restive, in Anatole France. His disillusionment as regards sensuality, the chief source of his love of life, is unmistakable. From the first novel, *Jean Servien*, to the last, the *Révolte des Anges*, that bitterness which consumes the satiated sensualist is the almost constant theme. I have already said that sensuality as France presents it is often independent of the sense of beauty, and that love as a thing higher than sensuality, and including it, is unknown to him. From the very beginning, his prime source of joy was pregnant with disillusion.

A dilettante who makes the sense of beauty and sensuality the sole guides of his existence may escape disillusion on one condition only: that he never think. France's hatred of thought and praise of ignorance are implicit proof that he recognized this truth. But he was cursed from birth by an unquenchable curiosity: he could not choose but think.

"Philosophic sadness," he says in one of those fine passages which defy translation, "has more than once been expressed with somber magnificence. As believers who have attained a high degree of moral beauty savor the joys of renunciation, so the *savant*, persuaded that all about him is but appearance and dupery, is intoxicated by that philosophic melancholy, and finds oblivion in the delights of calm despair."² There might be here a real contribution to the definition of that noble disillusion which is the mark of all

¹ *Contemporary Portraits*, First Series, 18.

² *Jardin d'Epicure*, 136.

the greatest poets, were it not vitiated hopelessly by Romantic sensuality. The truly great mind has never tasted either the "joys of renunciation" or the "delights of despair."

The cynical turn which France's disillusion took is due to his exclusive devotion to two mistresses: sensuality and aimless curiosity.¹ On his deathbed the amiable Abbé Coignard warned his faithful disciple against these two delightful but fruitless passions of his life: "Shun women and books for the softness and pride which are derived from them. . . . O my dear son, heed not those who, like me, indulge in sophistries on good and evil. Let not thyself be touched by the beauty and subtlety of their discourse."² Like the Latin poet, he might well have lamented: "*Video meliora proboque; deteriora sequor.*"

France had not a little in common with Mérimée, about whom he has written an interesting essay, which ends with the following paragraph:

"For a long time already he had been affected with spleen and saw continually the blue devils which Mrs. Senior had not been able to exorcise. M. d'Haussonville has tried to find the source of this melancholy. He thinks he has discovered it in 'the confused instinct of a life badly directed, given over to many impulses whose memory left more bitterness than sweetness.' I doubt whether Mérimée ever had a misgiving of this sort. Why should he have repented? He never recognized as virtues anything but energy in its various forms, nor as duties anything other than the passions. Was his sadness not rather that of the skeptic for whom the universe is only a succession of incomprehensible images and who recoils equally before life and death since neither the one nor the other has any sense for him? In short did he not experience that bitterness of mind and heart which is the inevitable

¹ France's "philosophic melancholy" was not so near to Shakespeare's as to that of his Choulette, who declared that "only desire and idleness render us sad." *Lys rouge*, 132.

² *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque*, 362.

chastisement of intellectual audacity, and did he not taste to the lees what Marguerite d'Angoulême has so well called the ennui common to every well-born creature?"¹

Mérimée's malady resembled that of Anatole France. The "Petronius of his age" (as Renan called Mérimée), and France as well, suffered from a "badly directed life given over to many impulses whose memory left more bitterness than sweetness." France defines the error of direction in the life of the Roman Petronius, of the mid-nineteenth century Petronius, and of himself: they "never recognized as virtues anything but energy . . . , nor as duties anything other than the passions"; they did not suffer from repentance but from the "sadness of the skeptic for whom the universe is only a succession of incomprehensible images"; they were afflicted by "that bitterness of mind and heart which is the inevitable chastisement" of using the intellect as a means of regaling an aimless curiosity rather than as an instrument whereby man may render himself more reasonable, more nobly human;—and the result of all this was the ennui which they drank to the lees.

¹ *Vie littéraire*, II, 55.

CHAPTER II

THE HUMANIST

1

I HOPE I have not seemed to attach unqualified opprobrium to certain qualities which are conspicuously present in the work of France: sensuality, aestheticism, curiosity, detachment, disillusion, skepticism. Each one of these, if wisely understood, is a virtue; but "all excess of virtue is vice," as Montaigne and the Greeks said, and these are particularly dangerous virtues since if they are cultivated without a concomitant countervailing virtue, or if they absorb more than their legitimate share of a man's devotion, unhappiness and something like futility are the result.

Humanism includes all the qualities just named. They all contribute to a well-rounded human development if each is accompanied by an appropriate counterpoise—if the cult of the senses is seconded by the cult of reason, the sense of beauty by the sense of fitness, curiosity by purpose; if detachment means a properly defined disinterestedness; if disillusion and skepticism are a clearing of the way for a positive advance, or at least for the attempt to advance. Anatole France is a humanist, but he is an incomplete humanist since he relies upon certain humanistic virtues to the practical exclusion of their complementary qualities.

"To form a mind, nothing is better than the study of the two ancient literatures according to the method of the old French humanists," he says. He followed not Sophocles

and Socrates and Virgil and Seneca and Marcus Aurelius directly, but the humanists of the Renaissance. Like these last he has drunk deep at the enchanted spring of the pagan cult of the senses and of pagan intellectual curiosity; but like them he failed to find a sufficient counterpoise to the solvent action of a view of life which was mainly inquisitive and aesthetic.

France is a humanist of the Renaissance and of Alexandria. The Renaissance was for him the period "when the antique Apollo was once again to get the upper hand of the Man of Galilee in Italy, at Rome, and even in the palace of the pope, who was, he too, converted to the paganism of the arts." ¹

His early poems show clearly the Alexandrian bent which is an essential element of his nature. They are characterized by voluptuousness and subtlety of expression. After the *Noces corinthiennes*, Catulle Mendès wrote of the author: "I can never think of Anatole France . . . without fancying I see a young Alexandrian poet of the second century, a Christian, doubtless, who is more than half Jew, above all a neo-Platonist, and, further, a pure theist deeply imbued with the teachings of Basilides and Valentinus, and the perfumes of the Orphic poems of some recent rhetorician, in whom subtlety was pushed to mysticism and philosophy to the threshold of the Kabbalah."

The period of Roman decadence had for France a fascination which is reflected in many of his volumes. "For an inquisitive mind," he says, "there never was a time more interesting than ours, except perhaps the period of Hadrian." ² France was not such an amiable Epicurean as Horace; his is the Epicureanism of his favorite Petronius.

¹ *Vie littéraire*, IV, 249.

² *Ibid.*, 165.

He was an Epicurean of the corrupted Empire, not a virile seeker of happiness like Lucretius, for in the Epicureanism of Lucretius there is strength, and his philosophy had a purpose. France doubtless has Lucretius in mind when he writes that the Renaissance revival of paganism dissipated the "vain terrors" under which man had long labored.¹ But Epicurus and Lucretius aimed to remove "vain terrors" from men and enable them to look toward heaven unafraid, not in order to get as many sensations out of life as possible, or to find amusement and excitement and agitation in the curiosity of the senses and of the intellect, "but rather to be able to look at all things with a mind at peace"—

Sed mage pacata posse omnia mente tueri.

France's humanism is that of Alexandria, of the Roman decadence, and of the Renaissance. The great humanism of the ancient world, of the one brief moment of Athenian glory, hardly a century in extent, includes all the virtues which I enumerated a moment ago as constituents of France's humanism and all the qualities which I suggested as indispensable antithetical virtues. It includes also certain other virtues which are noticeably absent from the work of France: imagination, insight, sympathy, discipline, will.

But there is one preëminent humanistic virtue which France scorns. It is more important than all others to the humanist—I mean seriousness. I have already alluded to France's lack of seriousness. I shall speak of it again.

2

By his conception of the relation of art to life and of beauty to truth the dilettante and aesthete may occupy the

¹ See above, page 56, note. France very frequently speaks, in Lucretian manner, of the "vain terrors" created by religion.

citadel of Alexandria, but he is a stranger on the Athenian Acropolis.

"For my part," says France, "if I were called upon to choose between beauty and truth, I should not hesitate. I should cling to beauty, certain that it carries in itself a higher and more profound truth than truth itself. I will even say that there is no other truth on earth than the beautiful."¹

The only justifiable interpretation of such a declaration is to be sought in its fruits. The style of France's work shows a concern for beauty. Of truth he has little to offer us. Truth to him is unattainable, and, as he says again and again, the quest of it is futile, and ridiculous,—and baneful, too, since the search for it by any means other than by the instincts and the senses is the source of most of our wretchedness.

Alexandria sought truth rationally; it sought beauty sensuously and sensually, as France did, but the old belief in the necessary alliance of truth and beauty had almost disappeared from the earth.

France despairs of human efforts to discover truth; he smiles at human guesses in the matter of ethics. And yet of course even he cannot talk about life and avoid the ethical problem. His moral ideal is that of *l'homme sensuel moyen*, "the average sensual man." There is in him no recognition of the value of that nice balance of ethical and aesthetic, which is the triumph of ancient humanism. This Greek doctrine is alien to his spirit. And yet it is so clearly a natural law of life and art that it has guided most of the writers who have been unmistakably great. There is no fine art, they seem to have thought, as there is no fine life, which does not successfully wed truth and beauty.

¹ *Vie littéraire*, II, 122.

Whether the aesthetic or the ethical purpose of art is primary is a question which has been endlessly debated. Both are essential in the Greek view. An undue leaning to one purpose or the other is unfortunate. The moment of the aesthete seems to have passed. The literature of to-day is concerned almost exclusively with morals. Some critics protest that it preaches not morality but immorality. In any case the ethical problem rides high, whether treated morally or immorally; and the aesthetic problem is submerged. The same type of critic who a generation ago found fault with the excessive aesthetic preoccupation of writers, censures to-day the neglect of the sense of beauty and the excess of moral, or immoral, earnestness. Such a critic was unpopular then as he is unpopular now, but surely one of the important functions of the critic is to come to the aid of writers by pointing out apparent defects in the existing artistic conventions; and the outstanding literary fault at all times is excess. The sound critic censured the excess of aestheticism in the Nineties. His successor censures the excess of didacticism to-day. Our men of letters, he says, are so much interested in the reformation of the world that art is neglected; each has his gospel to preach and preaches it with apostolic fervor. If the present generation gives evidence of a strong reaction against the aesthetic movement which France represents in his earlier work, it continues the ardent concern with the ethical problem which characterizes his last years.

France was not occupied with beauty and truth simultaneously, but successively, and in both cases with something of that intemperateness which was foreign to the Greek humanist. At the time of the Dreyfus Affair he plunged into the chaos of events with the same lack of moderation with which he had tried to elude the world in his dilettante days.

His previous disdain for truth and his idolatry of beauty were transformed into an unexpected interest in truth and an unfortunate faithlessness to beauty. As an aesthete and dilettante, he had tried to escape life and live with beauty, scorning truth. In his later novels and in his socialistic propaganda, he is so bent upon the establishment of social and economic truths as he sees them that the beauty which he formerly found in life and things is no longer his primary love, and even the art of writing is cultivated with diminished zeal.

The Greeks never tried to escape life. They loved it far more unequivocally than France, who loved it and hated it at the same time. And their life was not a divided allegiance: to them beauty and truth, the aesthetic and the ethical problem, were inseparable. A view of art which sets art apart from life, or life apart from art, would have been unintelligible to them, just as they could never have understood a religion which exalts duty and renunciation and fears the beautiful. They established the ideal of a fine harmony between the inner and the outer, between the soul and the body, between the spirit and the flesh. In the tragedies of Sophocles, the typical Greek, the aesthetic problem and the ethical problem receives each its appropriate consideration; and the beautiful and the good are one.

The world may have been simpler then than it is now. But even in those golden days the identification of the beautiful and the good was not a fact, but an ideal, and an ideal with difficulty attainable, as Plato knew well. To attain that ideal is difficult still to-day. Yet it is important that we seek to approximate it; and the author who, like Anatole France, abandons and casts easy ridicule upon the quest, is not of much help to those who have not yet embraced despair.

3

The dilettante aims to escape from life, and to take art along with him. Far from identifying beauty and truth in either life or art, or even trying to do so, he separates beauty and truth, adoring the former, and leaving the latter to others to do what they will with it.

"Truth is not the object of art," says France. "Truth is to be demanded of the sciences, since it is their object; it is not to be demanded of literature, which can have no object but to be beautiful."¹

Such a doctrine is very remote from the humanism of Greece. It is France's dilettante pose more than anything else which makes him a stranger in Athens. He is haunted by the fear that he may be taken seriously. He would not have us believe that he seeks so vulgar a thing as fame: the Abbé Coignard "esteemed literary glory at its proper value; that is, as equivalent to nothing."² He has a superior, Byronic disdain for the profession of letters. "Frankly," he says, "I think it is wiser to plant cabbages than to write books;"³ and he is careful to warn us that art is really not worthy of serious consideration. "Science," he says, "has the right to exact of us an attentive, thoughtful mind. Art has not this right. It is by nature useless and charming. Its function is to please; it has no other. . . . The pleasures which art affords ought never to cost the least fatigue."⁴

¹ *Jardin d'Epicure*, 40.

² *Opinions de Jérôme Coignard*, 6.

³ *Vie littéraire*, I, v. Compare the statement of M. Ségur (p. 22): "In his contempt for all things, Anatole France did not treat literature seriously. Writing seemed to him a supreme amusement, an elegant children's game, a sort of artificial illusion, a philter like lotus or opium, which enables man to gain an occasional release from his isolation and to escape for the moment from himself."

⁴ *Vie littéraire*, II, 208.

It is never possible in the case of a dilettante to determine just how much of what he says is merely a pose. The fear that he may be supposed to take things seriously is as real in him as the fear that he may not be taken seriously. Almost all aesthetes brush art nonchalantly aside, though it is in fact the most serious thing in their lives. So Oscar Wilde agrees with France. "All art," he says, "is quite useless." How graphic the little word "quite" makes this simple little sentence. One can see the great Oscar uttering it with a slight shrug of the shoulders, a lifting of the eyebrows, and an indolent, grudging wave of the hand: "All art is *quite* useless!"

France had a friend, named Jean, who for ten years had been making his home in the ruins of an old priory. The grounds included a garden which Jean did not cultivate. He passed his time watching the clouds in the sky, or on the ground the white fusees of the wild carrot. "That is certainly better," says Jean, "than to dissect frogs or to invent a new kind of torpedo boat."

France asked Jean if he hated the arts as he hated the sciences.

"Not at all," he replied; "there is in the arts a puerility which disarms hatred. They are children's games. Painters and sculptors daub pictures and make dolls. That is all. There would be no particular harm in that . . . if the poor fellows who give themselves up to this amusement did not take it seriously and become as a result egotistical, irritable, jealous, envious, maniacal, demented. They attach the idea of fame to all this nonsense. . . . Here the plowmen sing . . . , the shepherds . . . carve figures in boxwood roots, housewives make dove-shaped cookies for religious festivals. . . . These are innocent arts which pride does not poison. They are easy and proportioned to human weakness. Urban arts on the contrary demand an effort and every effort produces suffering. But what afflicts man and renders him

hideous and deformed is science, which . . . alters the true conditions of his commerce with nature. . . . It incites him to comprehension when it is evident that an animal is made for feeling and not for comprehension; it develops the brain, which is a useless organ, at the expense of the useful organs which we have in common with the beasts. . . . See that girl," he continued, pointing to his servant, who, "with an air of happy stupidity," had just poured their coffee. "She is happy and, no matter what she does, innocent; I am almost as happy as she, because I am almost as stupid."¹

Effort is for the bourgeois. And wisdom—that is for the bourgeois too.

All this is perhaps only affectation, but it had a great vogue—and has still, for though the dilettantes of to-day have ceased to be interested in beauty, they have not yet given up the old pose, or reality, of superiority to seriousness.

No great artist, surely, nor any great reader, ever felt that art is useless and charming. All were profoundly convinced that it is not only the most enjoyable but also the most useful thing in the world. To every great artist and to every great reader, art has always been a criticism of life, however variously this phrase may be defined. To the dilettante, art has only a vague connection with life. Its aim is to be beautiful, and to relieve in so far as possible the ennui of life by affording a pleasing excitation.

Among the humanists of the last fifty years Anatole France and Oscar Wilde have been conspicuously ranked. Unless these two aesthetes are denied right to the title generally accorded them, the word humanism, when used in relation to contemporary civilization, carries implications which are certainly foreign to the true humanistic spirit of the days when the Parthenon was built, and Sophocles vied

¹ *Jardin d'Epicure*, 279 ff.

with Aeschylus and Euripides in the theatre of Dionysus, and Socrates conversed with Plato under a plane-tree, on the banks of the Ilissus.

4

As France toyed with beauty and art and made light of them, so he toyed with truth and made light of reason in a fashion which would have been incomprehensible to the humanists of the great day, when men were not ashamed of being serious.

I have already spoken of this scholar's scorn for thought and reason. Again, as in the case of his attitude to art, it is difficult to separate the reality from the pose. The problem is however not important, since we are never so much concerned with what an author intends to put into his work as with what the effect is upon the reader—that is, with what he actually puts therein. Whether or not France despises art, he is an artist, and creates a love for art and an appreciation of art. Whether or not he scorns reason and thought, he is by no means a philosopher, and he induces in his reader a spirit of contempt for reason and thought.

He praises thought and shows its beneficence, if he has been pushed to the wall, as when he writes the Preface to the third volume of the *Vie littéraire*, where he is replying to Brunetière, or that long essay of the same volume in which the polemic is continued. In the latter place occur these words, which are of a France who had been shaken out of his dilettante pose:

“Let us not speak too ill of learning. Above all let us not distrust thought. Far from submitting it to our ethics, let us subordinate to it all that is not it. Thought—that is all man is.

Pascal said rightly, 'All our dignity consists in thought. Let us labor therefore to think well. That is the first principle of ethics.' . . . Thought guides the world. The ideas of yesterday make the conventions of to-morrow."¹

Again, when the war of the Dreyfus Affair was at its bitterness, he saw that life is a serious game, and that the pleasant gospel of the dilettante is inadequate. The following passage is from *Monsieur Bergeret à Paris*:

"To-morrow you will be in Paris. It is an illustrious and noble city. The nobility, to tell the truth, is not common to all its inhabitants. It is on the contrary to be found in only a very small number of the citizens. But a whole town, a whole nation, exists in a few individuals who think with more power and more exactness than the rest."²

A little later M. Bergeret tells his dog Riquet, to whom the above words also were addressed, that what exalts a nation is not the foolish cry that resounds in the streets, but the silent thought which is conceived in a garret, and one day changes the face of the earth.

"The visions of the philosopher," he had already declared, "have in all ages aroused men of action, who have set to work to realize them. Our thought creates the future. Statesmen work after the plans which we leave behind us."³

Again, at about the same time, at the inauguration of a statue to Renan, France terminates an impassioned apostrophe to the goddess of wisdom, Pallas Athene, with these words:

"Slowly, but always, humanity brings to pass the dreams of the sages."⁴

But these are momentary flashes, and nothing more, gen-

¹ *Vie littéraire*, III, 69.

² *Monsieur Bergeret à Paris*, 27.

³ *Ibid.*, 96-97, 32.

⁴ *Vers les Temps meilleurs*, II, 57.

erated by the heat of combat. That address to Pallas Athene is one of the most beautiful pages of French literature, but it is impious, for the speaker is a heretic—only a fleeting worshipper at the shrine of the great goddess.

Far more characteristic is the following passage, in which thought is described in true dilettante fashion, without ardor either of praise or dispraise:

“M. Jules Lemaître is a very wary and subtle spirit whose happy perversity consists in ceaseless doubt. That is the condition to which reflection has reduced him. Thought is a terrible thing. There is no reason to be astonished that men naturally fear it. It led Satan himself to revolt. And yet Satan was a son of God. It is the acid which dissolves the universe, and if all men began to think at the same time, the world would immediately cease to exist, but there is no reason to fear that misfortune. Thought is the worst of things. It is also the best. If it is true that it destroys everything, it is equally true that it has created everything. It is only by thought that we form a conception of the universe, and when it shows us that the universe is inconceivable, it does nothing but burst the soap-bubble that it had blown.”¹

Such incense, assuredly, rising to the heights of Olympus where she sits, rapt in contemplation, is hardly pleasing to the goddess of wisdom, Pallas Athene. Still less this truth, which she must regard as blasphemy, since it is pronounced by the epicurean Brotteaux, who “made of the quest of pleasure the sole aim of his life:”

“‘I hope at least, Citizen Brotteaux, that when the Republic has instituted the cult of Reason, you will not refuse your adherence to so wise a religion.’

“‘I love reason, but not fanatically,’ replied Brotteaux. ‘Reason guides and enlightens us; when you have made a divinity of her, she will blind you, and inspire you to crime.’”²

¹ *Vie littéraire*, II, 173.

² *Dieux ont Soif*, 87.

France cultivated reason like a voluptuary and loved and hated the pain which the cultivation entailed. He refers with something like ecstasy to "that noble curiosity, that uneasiness of thought, that sublime malady, that divine monster which we caress while it devours us."¹

It did not satisfy him, for it did not bring him continuous pleasure, the dream of the sensualist.

"I perceive, Polyphile," says Ariste, "that you are having a lovers' quarrel with intelligence."² Anatole France loved intelligence as he loved love, and with both he had lovers' quarrels. It is nothing more serious than that, either in the loving, or the quarrelling, or the infidelity. He pursued the delights of intellectual inquiry as he did the allurements of sensual passion, with very much the same attitude of mind and spirit; and the vanity of the one like the vanity of the other oppressed his satiated soul, leaving him disillusioned and blasé. The pursuit of aimless curiosity, like the cultivation of aimless passion, could have no other outcome. "I hate learning (*la science*)," the Abbé Coignard confessed to Jacques Tournebroche in a significant autobiographic passage of great psychological acuteness, "because formerly I loved it too much, like those voluptuaries who reproach women for not having equalled the dream they dreamed of them. I wished to know everything and to-day I suffer for my culpable folly." "Happy," added he, "thrice happy those good people assembled around that treacle-vender."³

5

There are so many people in the world who make of liv-

¹ *Vie littéraire*, II, 272.

² *Pierre Nozière*, 165.

³ *Opinions of Jérôme Coignard*, 149.

ing a tragic business that the dilettante becomes attractive with his easy tolerance, or indifference, and his ready pity, or contempt. So too there is a certain air of appealing elegance in his real, or affected, lack of seriousness—his real, or affected, indolence.¹

France loves to oppose his intellectual indolence to the seriousness and determined intellectual activity of others. He is grateful to Adrien Hébrard, who made of him a regular and punctual writer of *causeries* for the *Temps*. "You have triumphed over my indolence," he says.² So he writes to Charles Morice, who has put to him a troublesome literary question: "I prefer rather to feel than to understand. There is perhaps some indolence in that preference of mine. But indolence leads to contemplation; contemplation leads to beatitude; and beatitude is the recompense of the elect."³

France knows himself. There is not a little indolence inherent in the preference to feel rather than to understand. It is the charming, if fruitless, indolence of the dilettante; it is the pretty indolence of the *Vie littéraire*, which makes of the literary chats contained in those four volumes very pleasant reading, and decidedly more attractive, for indolent minds, than the severe and not infrequently wrong-headed volumes of Brunetière's *Etudes critiques*; it is the delightful indolence of Nicias and Brotteaux des Ilettes. But beware the indolent man in his wrath: he will know no bounds to his fury, no *mesure*. Hence Paphnuce, and Gamelin.

Anatole France, life-long admirer of the Greeks, never learned from them the great, homely lesson they can teach: *mesure*, moderation—as expounded, for instance, in one

¹ Compare on France's indolence, above, pp. 22-23, and 113-114.

² *Vie littéraire*, I, ii.

³ *Ibid.*, II, 191.

of the wisest chapters ever written, the seventh of the second book of Aristotle's *Ethics*. He was always extravagant: extravagantly skeptical; extravagantly the pure artist, impressionist, dilettante; and later, alternately extravagantly socialistic, and extravagantly cynical. Before 1897 those who did not agree with him were imbeciles; after 1897 a large section of the former imbeciles became to him luminaries (with reservations, it must be admitted), the rest remained still "imbeciles," and in addition "superstitious cowards," "monstrous impostors," "hypocrites," "gallows-birds," "hangmen," as any one will discover who reads those prophecies of a golden age to come contained in the *Eglise et la République* and *Vers les Temps meilleurs*. The tone of Anatole France was not before the Affair that of Sophocles and Virgil, it was that of Petronius; it was not after the Affair that of Socrates, it was that of Swift, or of Voltaire at his worst. The violence of Anatole France the cynical sensualist was great; the violence of Anatole France the militant socialist passed all bounds. The Licinius to whom Horace addressed his famous sermon on the virtue of moderation was said by Dio to have "habitually employed an intemperate and unbridled freedom of speech."

"M. de Lessay," says Sylvestre Bonnard, "hated fanaticism, but he was fanatically tolerant."¹ France resembled M. de Lessay until the time of the Affair; after that, he was frequently, in the name of tolerance, fanatically intolerant. There is not much difference, in fact, between fanatical intolerance and fanatical tolerance. It is desirable to avoid fanaticism of any kind. That, Anatole France knew well; he preaches and practises it in his early books; he preaches it in his later books, and practises it progressively less from *Thaïs* to the *Révolte des Anges*. It has been said that his

¹ Sylvestre Bonnard, 156.

attack upon religion in *Thaïs* and elsewhere was directed against religious fanaticism; and that the *Dieux ont Soif* is not an attack upon revolutionary doctrines but a denunciation of the excesses of the Terror. There is a certain show of truth in these assertions, but in both cases the attack is so violent, so fanatical, that for the ordinary intelligent reader France is attacking not religious fanaticism but religion; not the excesses of the Terror but those democratic principles which were held in high regard during the nineteenth century, and which culminated in the socialistic creed. And surely, as I have already suggested, whatever an author may intend to say, his book really says what the intelligent reader gets out of it. To plead that France's meaning is something other than what the ordinary intelligent reader derives from his works is to tax him with literary incompetence, a charge which might be regarded as more serious than that of intemperance of speech and lack of moderation.

I am not ignorant of the fact that the moderation of classic art has been generally ascribed to Anatole France. I am aware that his tone is ordinarily moderate, especially in his early books. I am referring not so much to the tone in which he expresses his ideas as to the ideas themselves. It is incomprehensible that the moderation of an author should be insisted upon if he has a habit of arbitrarily simplifying complicated problems and of making extravagant statements, however gently and softly he may speak. No temperateness of tone can relieve of a certain burden of intemperance the unqualified declaration that man is still, and always will be, essentially a gorilla, especially when the declaration is frequently repeated. In fact the writer who says a temperate thing intemperately may, I think, put forth a better claim to moderation than the man who says an intemperate thing temperately.

France almost never occupies the middle ground in relation to any of the problems of life and art. That is one of the reasons why his followers are so numerous. For most of us find sanity dull while we are attracted by the exquisite indolence, tolerance, and indifference of the dilettante,—his regal superiority to life,—and we are “stimulated” by his cry of rage.

The great work of France, however, is not that of his irate mood, but that which is more consistent with his predominantly indolent temperament. His frequent “lovers’ quarrels” with reason, for instance, are the result of the insistence of reason that she be looked upon as something more than a trifle to be toyed with amorously. She has her serious moments during which she wishes to be conversed with as an adult, not as a child playing at sand castles by the sea. Then France becomes angry. That is not the kind of mistress who appeals to his curious, sensual nature; and he reviles her.

But usually he and she get along very well together, for she is docile and they walk hand in hand through the green, flowered fields of life playing at solving intellectual problems. They usually get as far as the paradox, and stop at that pleasant, amusing inn. The paradox is the form in which the dilettante naturally casts thought. It has been called the half-truth. It is pretty, ingenious, harmless, or even a positive gain, provided it is recognized for what it is: half the truth; that is, partially true, and partially false.

But France dogmatically sets his unqualified half-truths before us as if they were whole truths—not absolute truths perhaps, but at any rate as near the absolute as the human mind may reach. And in this he shows his intellectual indolence. It may seem unwarranted to speak of the indolence of the author of two-score volumes. The observation is

amply justified, however, by France's own statements, by the testimony of all who knew him, and by the literary quality of his two-score volumes. Intellectual indolence is evident in his very frequent repetition of phrases and pages; in his reluctance to attempt long works; in the pain with which he forced, or tried to force, upon himself the severe labor of composition; and above all in his thinking. He never gets to the bottom of things, and never even tries to. He views a problem of life from a certain angle and sets down his conclusion. The conclusion proves to be a half-truth, and nothing more, for the truth, as France himself says, "is composed of all contrary truths just as white is a composite of all colors." The man of active and conscientious intellectual integrity (and France's devoted admirers insist that he is such a man) presents half-truths as nothing more than half-truths; and expresses a judgment which he wishes to be regarded as his version of the truth only after he has gathered together all the half-truths which bear upon his problem, and has satisfied himself that by the confrontation of all "contrary truths" he has done his best to work his way toward the ever-elusive whole truth. The labor incident to such a process was abhorrent to Anatole France. It is easier—and more startling to the reader—to scatter "contrary truths" throughout one's works. Many a writer has acquired in this way the reputation of great profundity.

Life, France thinks, is a tissue of paradoxes. Such, in truth, it is for the ordinary man, who finds it impossible to disentangle the true from the false in the half-truths with which he is forced to deal; and so, because he recognizes his own insufficiency, he eagerly seeks the great masters of literature, whose insight is such that they, in proportion to their greatness, distinguish the true from the false, and carry us

onward beyond the half-way house toward the unattainable goal where truth resides. Anatole France sets cleverly before us—and sometimes beautifully—the half-truths of life which we frequently have difficulty in putting into words. If Sainte-Beuve is, as France says, the St. Thomas, the “universal doctor,” of the nineteenth century,¹ he himself is the great doctor of the Nineties, the doctor of the half-truth. With that air of modesty which he easily assumes, he protests against the ascription to him of the suppleness of intelligence essential in a doctor of the half-truth. “I consider Gyp a great philosopher,” he says. “I should be much grieved if this statement looked like a paradox. I am very careful not to risk paradoxes. To carry a paradox more wit is needed than I have. Naïveté befits me better.” In the essay of the *Vie littéraire* which immediately follows the one on Gyp, he amuses himself by repeating the jest: “In order to lie I should need a certain rhetoric of which I do not know the first word. I am ignorant of the artifices of language, and can speak only to express my thought.”²

His work is in fact made up of endless paradoxes or half-truths. It is partially true, for instance, that man is essentially a gorilla and that life is a tragic absurdity; it is partially true that to take life seriously is ridiculous, and that love and hunger are the springs of all human action. The impressionistic theory of criticism is partially right, for it is manifestly impossible for the critic to escape entirely from his temperament; and literary standards have not the precision of a mathematical formula. It is partially true that God is cruel, and France’s Satanism,³ which has dictated to him pages and stories and books, is slightly

¹ *Vie littéraire*, I, v.

² *Ibid.*, II, 237, 254.

³ See Rudwin in the *Open Court*, XXXVII, 268 ff.

ridiculous, not because it is not a natural mood of revolt, but because it is prompted by a too naïve acceptance of one half-truth in the place of another half-truth.

Others, besides France, have played with paradoxes. There are in Montaigne, for instance, an abundance of such quirks as this, which France delightedly quotes: "Ignorance is a soft, sweet pillow;" but France failed to remark the restriction (*in cauda venenum*): "for a well-made head." This sort of poison—poison to the complacent and the giddy—Montaigne loves to secrete in the tail of his paradoxes. France's paradoxes are more naïve. "Thought is all man," he says. That is partially true. "In instinct alone is truth," he says again, flying to the opposite extremity of the arc. That also is partially true. Again, he is sure that "it is an iniquitous abuse of the intelligence to use it in the search for truth;" but at another time he cites Pascal with approval: "All our dignity consists in thought. Let us labor therefore to think well."

"Consider the sort of minds influenced by set sayings," writes the Aphorist in *Richard Feverel*. "A proverb [and the paradox resembles the proverb] is the halfway-house to an idea, I conceive; and the majority rest there content. Can the keeper of such a house be flattered by his company?"

One of our well-known American critics says in speaking of himself: "What first of all appears is his [the writer's] preference for those authors who are civilized: intelligent, skeptical, ironical, lucid." I am not sure that this particular critic would accept France as representing the kind of authors whom he prefers; but he seems to have described with great accuracy the nature of France's excellence as the latter's admirers see it: he is distinguished above all else, they say, by his "cult of critical intelligence." He is so

civilized, so critically intelligent, so skeptical, so ironical, so lucid, that he is never misled by the illusions of other civilized, intelligent, skeptical, ironical, lucid writers who dream of working their way painfully and laboriously to a point a few paces beyond the halfway-house to an idea.

France says of himself and of his fellow-writers: "We are intelligent, ingenious, curious, restless, fearless (*adroits, curieux, inquiets, hardis*)"; and he adds, with perfect seriousness, so far as I can see, in a moment of frank and astute self-criticism: "We want to startle, and that is all we want to do."¹ This is the old French sport called *épater le bourgeois*, a phrase which has been variously translated. Byron, who was an adept at the game, says:

"Even good men like to make the public stare."

"To stir up the animals" is a far more picturesque translation recently ascribed to the most popular of American critics, one who has played this game all his writing life.

Byron's translation was perhaps not entirely original. Johnson had already used an expression very much like his:

¹ "We want to startle, and that is all we want to do. Only one kind of praise touches us, that which calls attention to our originality, as if originality were something worth while in itself, and as if there were not bad as well as good originalities." *Vie littéraire* IV, 164. Compare the words addressed to George Moore by his Conscience: "The same old desire of admiration, admiration in its original sense of wonderment (*miratio*); you are a true child of the century; you do not desire admiration, you would avoid it, fearing it might lessen that sense which you only care to stimulate—wonderment. And, persecuted by the desire to astonish, you are now exhibiting yourself in the most hideous light you can devise." France professed little respect for the intelligence of his readers. "If you believe," he said to M. Ségur (p. 173), "that I have any illusions as to the intelligence of my contemporaries, you are mistaken. My books . . . do not merit their great popularity, which pleases my publisher, but not me. My large public reads me assiduously only on account of the ambiguities and cock-and-bull stories which enable it to discover and recognize itself between the lines."

"On the 30th of September [1769]," says Boswell, "we dined together at the Mitre. . . . BOSWELL. 'Is it wrong then, Sir, to affect singularity, in order to make people stare?' JOHNSON. 'Yes, if you do it by propagating error; and, indeed, it is wrong in any way. There is in human nature a general inclination to make people stare; and every wise man has himself to cure of it, and does cure himself. If you wish to make people stare by doing better than others, why, make them stare till they stare their eyes out. But consider how easy it is to make people stare by being absurd. I may do it by going into a drawing-room without my shoes. You remember the gentleman in *The Spectator* who had a commission of lunacy taken out against him for his extreme singularity, such as never wearing a wig, but a night-cap. Now Sir, abstractedly, the night-cap was best: but relatively, the advantage was overbalanced by making the boys run after him!'"

The rules of the game are very simple. One has merely to understate or overstate, to present what is one half or one tenth true or barely possible as nine tenths true or quite probable, to make a fool of the wise man or a wise man of the fool, to demonstrate the immorality of the saint and the virtue of the sinner, to praise Béranger to the skies and make a buffoon of Hugo, to rehabilitate Blue Beard and Satan and stealthily withdraw the pedestals from under Napoleon and God. Of course, though the rules of the game are simple, for distinguished success in it a certain skill and a certain temperament are required, and only rarely is a player encountered who is as successful as Anatole France. Here is an example of his dexterity, a good one but not better than scores of others that might be culled from his works:

"Since," says Dr. Obnubile, "riches and civilization are no more effective obstacles to war than poverty and barbarism, since the folly and wickedness of mankind are incurable, one good action remains to be performed. The wise man will get together enough dynamite to blow up this planet. When it is rolling in pieces through space, an imperceptible amelioration will have been ef-

fectured in the universe, and satisfaction will be given to the universal conscience, which, as a matter of fact, does not exist.”¹

Even the bourgeois will shudder with delicious horror on reading this passage, but it is only the superior soul who will detect the signature of the master of irony in the last phrase: “which, as a matter of fact, does not exist.” The joy of bourgeois spirits is in the bold wickedness of the writer; that of superior souls is in the imperviousness of the bourgeois to the crafty art of the last phrase.

The poor bourgeois! They have been plagued for some thousands of years now: Socrates spent his waking hours showing that they were as ignorant as their aristocratic betters; Horace despised them; Shakespeare scorned them; Heine dubbed them Philistines and Arnold brought the name to us; Mr. Mencken calls them Puritans (Philistines was a better term), and continues the attack with great vigor. But alas! The Philistines (or Puritans) have rarely heard themselves denounced, for Socrates reached few of them; and Horace held himself and his works aloof from them; and Shakespeare is unintelligible to them except when he sinks to their level; and Heine and Arnold they never read. They do read Anatole France (as they read Mr. Mencken) and are hugely diverted, for they think, each of them, that the sharp-tongued critic is talking not about them, but about their neighbor. Anatole France (like Mr. Mencken) affords his readers that most agreeable of all sensations—the sense of superiority to one’s neighbors.

Leslie Stephen was not pleased by the vogue which fell to the lot of the word Philistine—“a word which,” he says, “I understand properly to denote indifference to the higher intellectual interests.” He adds, with a side-thrust at

¹ *Ile des Pingouins*, 178.

Arnold, who did not deserve the cut, though it is merited, perhaps, by some of his successors: "The word may also be defined as the name applied by prigs to the rest of their species."¹

The great virtue of the paradox is that it dazzles and puzzles the Philistine, and is an infallible means of delighting readers who like to see an author *épater le bourgeois*, "stir up the animals." "We like to startle," says France. He succeeds.

6

When, a few years ago, the first study of Anatole France *intime* appeared, *Les Matinées de la Villa Saïd*, by Paul Gsell, the numerous reviewers seized upon one passage above all others, and quoted it *in extenso*:

"FRANCE (with sudden vivacity): 'Skeptic! Skeptic! To be sure, they will still call me a skeptic, and for them that title is the last of insults. But for me it is the most beautiful of eulogies. Skeptic! All the masters of French thought have been skeptics: Rabelais, Montaigne, Molière, Voltaire, Renan. All the loftiest spirits of our race have been skeptics, all those whom I venerate tremblingly, whose humble pupil I am.'

"France's voice had at this moment lost its accustomed indolence; it had become suddenly vibrant, and his features, ordinarily so quizzical, were now taut and quivering.

"He continued: . . ."²

M. Gsell must be exaggerating. What horrible accusation has been made? Why this trembling intensity? Because "they" would call the master a skeptic? "They" are the

¹ *Hours in a Library*, III, 253. "Like other nicknames," he says in another place (*A Cynic's Apology*), "that word has degenerated in common use, till it is sometimes a mere shibboleth, employed by the genuine prig to designate all who are not prigs."

² P. 81.

bourgeois, the Philistines, the Puritans. Certainly Anatole France never troubled himself about *their* opinion. And the fact is that the number of people who would hurl the cry "skeptical" at a writer as the last of insults, if they understood the term, has probably been fabulously overestimated.

"The time is near," says France, "when Pontius Pilate will be greatly esteemed for having made a remark which for eighteen centuries has weighed heavily upon his memory."¹ There is surely a misunderstanding here. The time arrived long ago when the question of Pontius Pilate was in high esteem among intelligent men; his memory is still clouded, however, not because of his question, but because he asked it lightly, and would not wait to discover whether he might receive an answer.

Any person who takes the trouble to think at all, recognizes, I suppose, that all the principles, standards, forms, laws under which he organizes his knowledge, or his guesses, are but hypotheses. He does not look upon them as final; they are merely, so far as he can see, the nearest approximations to the truth yet attained by man. He is perpetually skeptical about them, realizing that they will be improved only on condition that they are regarded as nothing more than hypotheses. They are being constantly modified; some are being discarded. But the prudent man (how exasperatingly prudent he is sometimes!) is unwilling to give up whatever principles he has (defective as they are) till a substitute has been offered which seems likely to prove more adequate than that which it is to displace. Some eager spirits are impatient with him because he does not readily fall in with their proposals. They are skeptical in regard to the world as it is; he is skeptical both in regard to the world as it is and in regard to the world which, as it appears to him,

¹ *Vie littéraire*, I, 9.

their reforms would bring into existence. He is more skeptical than they; sometimes, perhaps, even too skeptical. He follows the guidance of two famous skeptics, Montaigne and Anatole France, who have taught him by frequent iteration that what is bad but not so bad that a change may not easily make it worse.

It may be contended that Anatole France himself is much less skeptical than a very large number of the ordinary citizens of the world. The true skeptic is wary of committing himself to a decided expression of opinion in matters which are not susceptible of proof. He is inclined always to say "I think," "Perhaps." Anatole France rarely says, "Perhaps;" and he almost always knows. He knows not only that Zola is a beast and that Georges Ohnet's name must not appear in histories of literature, but also that voluptuousness is the great human virtue, that there is no such thing as objective criticism or objective art, that there is no art or science of history or of aesthetics, that there is no science of biology or of anthropology, that the last man on earth will be as stupid and as naked as the first, that everybody has, openly or covertly, all the vices which he finds in himself. However contradictory may be the truths which he imparts to us, he gives them all to us as truths. He adopts constantly the magisterial tone. He affirms the complete incorrigibility of mankind just as dogmatically as the naïve assert the existence of God.

Skepticism is one of the surest marks of critical intelligence; it is the state of mind in which thinkers set forth in pursuit of truth. France is right when he declares that the masters of French thought have been skeptics: Rabelais, Montaigne, Molière, Voltaire, Renan. He might have added Descartes, Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, and many others.

His own name might belong with these except for the fact that, though he was of the same skeptical turn of mind as they, he did not, like them, set forth in search of the truth. He loved skepticism, not as a clearing of the way for the pursuit of truth, but for its own sake.

"Doubt," he says, "is a faculty which is rare among men; only very few spirits possess within themselves its germ, which does not develop without cultivation. It is singular, exquisite, philosophic, immoral, transcendent, monstrous, full of malignity, injurious to persons and property, contrary to the polity of states and to the prosperity of empires, fatal to humanity, destructive of the gods, a horror to heaven and earth."¹ Doubt is really no such fantastic monster at all. France is merely trying to frighten us away from it, because it will cease to be a thing wherewith to *épater le bourgeois* if too many of us try to join the ranks of those "very few spirits" who "possess within themselves its germ." It is nothing more terrifying than open-mindedness—a rare quality, indeed, but surely very far more widely diffused than France seems to believe.

Skepticism is the *beginning* of wisdom, not the end, as France would have us think. He does not seek the truth. He toys with half-truths—and enjoys the game. His skepticism is as aimless and as fruitless as his curiosity. It is not surprising that one who so fatally misunderstands the true function of skepticism should end by laughing at skeptics: "our free-thinkers (*libres penseurs*), who usually do not think freely for the reason that they do not think at all."²

Like the humanists of the Renaissance, Anatole France combined with the ancient love of beauty the Alexandrian sense of the helplessness of man—ancient aesthetics and Alex-

¹ *Ile des Pingouins*, 244.

² *Ibid.*, 316.

andrian Pyrrhonism. The skepticism of the nineteenth century is not quite like ancient skepticism. In the former there is frequently an element of despair which is less conspicuous in the latter. All the centuries of the high hope of Christianity have intervened between the two. But Anatole France's skepticism is an extreme form of modern skepticism; it is a defiance hurled at the forces which guide the universe, divine, natural, and human—a defiance in which are mingled disappointment, pique, and a dash of bravado.

Truth and peace of mind have been the two aims of the great skeptics, ancient and modern, and of the great epicureans. Neither Anatole France the epicurean nor Anatole France the skeptic sought either truth or peace of mind. It is probable that he would have wished himself capable of possessing the detachment of the Skeptic Timocles of Cos whom we meet in *Thaïs*, but it is the Epicurean Nicias of the same book who represents what he really was. Nicias loves life and passion while denouncing both; he despises reason and spends his happiest moments reasoning; he is a dilettante, an aesthete, and a voluptuary; he is bored by all things but would willingly give up no one of his habits; he is a delightful companion, a precious ornament of brilliant Alexandria, but a source of no joy, satisfaction, or strength to himself or the world, aimlessly floating on the sea of doubt, denial, and indifference. He is a nineteenth century skeptic of France's type; he has little in common with the ancient Skeptics, or with his contemporary Marcus Aurelius, or with Lucretius.

Anatole France rejects Pyrrhonism, absolute skepticism. "Since I had not the courage of silence and renunciation," he said, "I have willed to believe; I have believed. I have believed at least in the relativity of things and in the suc-

cession of phenomena.”¹ France dwells somewhat tediously on the old familiar observation of Heraclitus, which has been a favorite burden of lamentation for over two thousand years now. It was especially attractive among the tearful heroes of the Romantic age. “I am sorry,” says Goethe, “for those who make a great stir about the transitoriness of things, and lose themselves in contemplation of the nothingness of human affairs.”

One aspect of the philosophical doctrine of relativity is especially popular to-day—the relativity of moral conventions. “What is good and what is evil?” asks France.² Just as Pilate and thousands more have asked, “What is truth?” so for centuries the question has been asked, “What is good; what is bad?” Montaigne and Pascal, among others, asked this question; but they did not ask it, as France did, merely for the effect it produces on the bourgeois; they asked it as a preliminary to an effort to answer it. Their answers are not entirely satisfactory. We have not yet attained a satisfactory answer. So the earnest thinker adds his contribution; and we use it in the elaboration of those hypotheses by which we live.

Though France pretends to reject an absolute skepticism for himself, his unguarded readers have imbibed it from him. They have learned from him precisely what Jacques Tournebroke learned from him: “I am not credulous,” says Jacques, the faithful disciple. “I have on the contrary a marvelous propensity to doubt, and this inclination leads me to distrust common sense and even evidence like everything else.” He concludes that “to believe nothing is to believe everything.”³ Thus incredulity becomes credulity,

¹ *Vie littéraire*, III, xi; compare *ibid.*, II, 125 ff.; etc.

² *Thaïs*, 191.

³ *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque*, 166. This is one of those non-sequi-

skepticism becomes superstition, and France reduces his system to the absurd. The true skeptic is not thus hoist with his own petard.

7

It is because of his desire to prove to us his universal indifference that France informs us of his belief in nothing but the relativity of things. Of course he hoped we would realize that this article of faith did not preclude absolute skepticism, from which he was, in fact, rescued by his faith in the pleasures of emotional and intellectual curiosity. I confess again that in the study of Anatole France it is difficult for me to discriminate reality and pose. His most zealous admirers will find me in frequent error. They will be sometimes offended by my unreasonable unwillingness to accept his statements at their face value. Again, when I treat seriously what he seems to me to have set down seriously, they will tax me with naïveté. "The master did not really mean that," they will say; "he was merely jesting." Where I have mistaken his real meaning, the fault is, to be sure, partly mine; but it is partly his as well. Lemaître said of Renan: "I betray his thought, perhaps, in translating it; too bad! But why does he permit himself subtleties which depend on the mere arrangement of words?"¹ One may voice a similar complaint in regard to France. Madame Bergeret puts the matter more bluntly: "I don't understand you, Lucien. You laugh at things that are not laughable, and one never knows whether you are joking or serious."²

turs which France scatters through his work, thus giving it the appearance of a mine of wisdom.

¹ *Contemporains*, I, 205.

² *Mannequin d'Osier*, 17.

France is decidedly disconcerting. He is an artist, and yet he asserts that art is nothing more than "useless and charming"; he is a literary critic, and he believes that there is no such thing as literary criticism as there is no aesthetic; he shows a considerable knowledge of the natural world and of biology, and maintains that science leads to the discovery of no truths, or, at any rate, that "it is a great error to believe that scientific truths differ essentially from vulgar truths";¹ he is a moralist, constantly concerned with the ethical problem, and declares that there is no ethic as there is no sociology and no biology;² he is a historian, and assures us that history is an idle dream; he is a philosopher, the author of books filled with expressions of opinion, and he is confident that man is not a rational being.

He is aware of the insignificance of man, as are all humanists. But the true humanist, with surer perspective, sees not only the half-truth of man's insignificance but also the complementary half-truth of man's greatness. As France looks into the dim past, the near past, the present, the future, and the final end of things, he generally sees nothing more than that men seem to be "bacilli and vibriones who are a horror to the universal order."³ Certain of his pages, written when he is in the contemplative mood of one who sees what is, in the light of what was and what will be, call to mind, by contrast, the following passage of Amiel:

"It gives liberty and breadth to thought to learn to judge our own epoch from the point of view of universal history, history from the point of view of geological periods, geology from the point of view of astronomy. When the duration of a man's life or of a people's life appears to us as microscopic as that of a fly, and in-

¹ *Jardin d'Epicure*, 53.

² *Ibid.*, 217.

³ *Vie littéraire*, IV, 229.

versely, the life of a gnat as infinite as that of a celestial body, with all its dust of nations, we feel ourselves at once very small and very great, and we are able, as it were, to survey from the height of the spheres our own existence, and the little whirlwinds which agitate our little Europe.”¹

This passage was written in Berlin on July 20 of the fateful year 1848. It is clearly reminiscent of Pascal, whom one can hardly quote on this subject without an apology, so universally known is his dictum: “It is dangerous to show man how like he is to the beasts without at the same time showing him his greatness.”

Man is the quintessence of dust, says the true humanist, but he is infinite in faculty; he is “the glory, jest, and riddle of the world.”

“The great writers,” said Longinus, “see that man aspires to reach the summit, that man is a noble creature according to nature’s intention”; and the great literary works of humanistic days show the heroic failure of man aspiring to reach the summit. Their emphasis is not more on the failure than on the aspiration.

France was too completely the child of his age to be a thoroughgoing humanist. With many of his fellow dilettantes and aesthetes, he marched into the camp of the enemy, the naturalists,—and capitulated. He could thenceforth no longer be expected to see that it is dangerous “to show man how like he is to the beasts” without demonstrating the other half of the truth also. The ideal of the humanist is rational self-determination, the human being acquiring mastery of himself and conquering whatever maleficence there may be in his star. Anatole France surrendered himself to his impulses, having learned from Rousseau that instinct, not reason, is man’s proper guide; and from the naturalists

¹ Translated by Mrs. Humphry Ward.

that nature will have her way, and that it is consequently futile to seek to develop any form of self-direction. The true humanist does not lightly accept the dictation of the forces which control the age in which he lives; nor does he, without a struggle, acquiesce in the tyranny of nature.

France laughs at all human ideals and all idealists, including socialists. He holds up martyrs to the ridicule of the sophisticated. Rabelais, he says, "maintained his opinions up to the stake, exclusively, considering in advance, like Montaigne, that to die for an idea is to attach a very high price to conjectures. Far from blaming him, I praise him. . . . Martyrdom should be left to those who, since they do not know how to doubt, have in their very simplicity the excuse for their stubbornness. There is a certain impertinence in letting oneself be burned for an opinion."¹

Such an attitude is entirely justifiable in the case of a man who sees nothing in life worth attaching oneself to except curiosity and sensuality. But such was decidedly not the opinion of Rabelais and Montaigne, who, though they would not willingly suffer martyrdom themselves, knew how to admire the courage, and the confidence in the value of human achievement, and the devotion to truth (or what one holds to be the truth) which make martyrs: the Etienne Dolets, the Giordano Brunos, the Galileos, the Lavoisiers. These and scores of others, lay and religious, who suffered death or torment, are excused by our nineteenth century hedonist "for their stubbornness" because in their "simplicity" they did not possess that superiority to man and things which alone can confer the inestimable boon of knowing "how to doubt." Thus deficient, they betrayed "a certain impertinence in letting [themselves] be burned for an opinion."

¹ *Vie littéraire*, III, 31.

France was not trifling when he wrote the passage just quoted. It issues naturally and inevitably from his philosophy of life. But he is not a man of system, and can deny himself three times and more. "What is wonderful," he declares, quoting Pascal, "is not that the field of the stars is so vast, but that man has measured it."¹ "Is life," he asks, "to be hated, and man to be looked upon as an object of horror? No, the acephalic Bull himself has some good in him. . . . He has always done more good than harm. Otherwise he would not continue to exist. He is worth as much as nature is, and she, after all, is rather indifferent than wicked. . . . Men are worth more than nature."² And take heed of the note of honey-dripping tenderness in the following passage from an essay entitled "Virtue in France":

"But soon he [an angel observing men from on high] will perceive that we suffer, and our greatness will be revealed to him. Then you will hear him murmur: 'They are born infirm, sick, famished, destined to devour one another. And they do not all devour one another. I see some even who in their great distress stretch out their arms to one another. They console and sustain one another. As a distraction they have invented industries and arts. They have even poets to amuse them. Their god created maladies; they have created the physician, and they busy themselves as best they can to correct nature. Nature produced evil, and a great evil it is. It is they who have produced good. That good is slight, but it is their work. The earth is bad: it is insensible. But man is good because he suffers. He has derived everything from his sorrow, even his genius.' . . . Sorrow is the sole science of life. Its lessons would inspire patience, which is the most difficult of heroisms, constant heroism."³ The essay continues in this tone.

¹ *Jardin d'Épicure*, 10.

² *Vie littéraire*, I, 34.

³ *Ibid.*, I, 337.

The derision of heroism which I quoted above is not more alien to true humanism than the sentimentality which imposes a touch of effeminacy upon all that is sound in the thought of this passage. The humanist has not a head so bleakly skeptical as that of France, nor a heart so soft. He could subscribe to this: "Pure reason, if they [moralists] had listened to her alone, would have led them by divers routes to the most monstrous conclusions . . ."; but not to what follows, in the sense in which Anatole France understands it: "This holy and salutary truth . . . that there is for man a surer guide than reason, and that he must hearken to the heart."¹

The world of literature contains many accounts of contests between the head and the heart in the same individual. Anatole France might well declare with Rousseau that his head and his heart do not seem to belong to the same person.

Says the Abbé Coignard:

"I imitate the wisdom of that old woman of Syracuse who, at the time when Dionysius treated his people with execrable cruelty, used to go to the temple every day to pray the gods that they preserve the life of the tyrant. Dionysius, having been informed of so singular a case of piety, desired to know the reason for it. He summoned the good woman and questioned her.

" 'I am not young,' she replied. 'I have lived under many tyrants, and I have observed that a worse always succeeds a better. You are the most detestable I have yet seen; whence I conclude that your successor will be, if possible, worse than you, and I pray the gods to give him to us no sooner than is absolutely necessary.'

"That old woman was very wise."²

So speaks the head of Anatole France. Not long thereafter the good Abbé is again enjoying the delights of con-

¹ *Jardin d'Epicure*, 215-216.

² *Opinions de Jérôme Coignard*, 73.

versation. He has perplexed his faithful disciple, Jacques Tournebroche, who expostulates:

"M. l'Abbé, have you forgotten the old woman of Syracuse that now you suggest the desirability of changing tyrants?"

"Tournebroche, my son," replied the Abbé, "I confess with good grace that I have fallen into contradiction. . . . But in the present case the contradiction is only apparent. My reason is still with the old woman of Syracuse. I think to-day what I thought yesterday. Only I have just allowed myself to be carried away by my heart and to yield to my passions, as does the vulgar crowd."¹

The last words of our friend the Abbé are these:

"Tournebroche, my son, you see me all of a sudden uncertain and embarrassed, stammering and stupid, at the mere thought of correcting what I find detestable. Do not think that it is timidity of mind. Nothing astonishes the audacity of my thought. But give good heed, my son, to what I am going to say to you. The truths discovered by the intelligence remain sterile. The heart alone is capable of making dreams fecund. . . . And I confess that I have up to the present been too rational in my criticism of laws and manners. That criticism will accordingly fall fruitless and will dry like a tree burned by the April frost. To serve man, one must reject all reason as encumbering baggage and rise on the wings of enthusiasm. If you reason, you will never fly."²

The Abbé's head follows Diderot; his heart flees to the embrace of Rousseau!

Rousseau is the villain of the *Dieux ont Soif*, which is a furious indictment of that great enthusiast who taught poor Gamelin to be guided by his heart. The Terror is the work of Rousseau, whose disciples, of whom Gamelin is the type, "showed themselves inaccessible to argument and judged by their hearts: they always voted for condemnation."³

One of the most difficult tasks of the humanist is to settle

¹ *Opinions de Jérôme Coignard*, 88-89.

² *Ibid.*, 287-288.

³ *Dieux ont Soif*, 175.

the eternal contention between the head and the heart by affording to each its legitimate scope. Anatole France is apparently not even aware of the contention; he oscillates: now his head commands him, now his heart. He usually takes orders from his head. This is fortunate, perhaps, for his heart is so soft that when it guides him it usually leads him into bathos, from which even *Sylvestre Bonnard* is not entirely exempt. When his head is in control, he takes his stand with the revilers of reason and of mankind. He does not give us isolated examples of moral obliquity with the expressed or implicit qualification that he is dealing with exceptions: he gives us what he considers to be representative men and women, and they are, with trifling exceptions, "harsh, egotistical, jealous, sensual, ferocious." The trifling exceptions are made up of minor characters—simple and stupid souls like the mother of Jacques Tournebroke; the servant-girl of the Bergerets; Pied d'Alouette, the vagabond; and Crainquebille, the half-witted street-vender.

He can speak softly:

"Can [you] not pardon an innocent spirit if he puts his hand to things of art with less rigor and consecutiveness than [you yourself] adopt; brings to the pursuit less reason, and especially less reasoning; preserves in criticism the familiar tone of the chat and the light step of the Sunday stroll; stops where he wishes and pours out confidences occasionally; follows his tastes, his fancies, and even his whims—on condition that he be always true, sincere, and kindly . . . ?" ¹

This is gentle "an 'twere any nightingale," but the "innocent spirit" who wrote France's novels was hardly "true, sincere, and kindly," unless it is "true, sincere, and kindly" to demonstrate that all men, except the simpletons, are "harsh, egotistical, jealous, sensual, ferocious."

¹ *Vie littéraire*, III, xviii-xix. The "innocent spirit" is France himself.

France extols men in the rare moments when his heart guides him, and then he is in danger of slipping into sentimentality; he rises to defend men (just as he rises to defend thought, as I have suggested) when he is engaged in a polemic with one of his dearest enemies who must be annihilated. Why did he speak so softly in the passage which I have just quoted? Because he was bent on discrediting Brunetière. There was another man whom, at a certain period, he hated as he hated Brunetière; that was Zola. Tears come to his eyes, his heart swells as he laments the offense suffered by his delicate sensibilities in reading *La Terre*:

"He [Zola] has not less offended nature in the beast than in the woman, and I cannot forgive him yet for having defiled the innocent cow by having pitilessly displayed the misery of her suffering and of her maternity. Permit me to give you the reason for my indignation. A few years ago I happened to see a calf born in a stable. The mother suffered cruelly in silence. When the calf was born, she turned toward it her eyes full of tears, and, stretching forth her neck, for a long time she licked the little creature which had caused her so much pain. That was touching, beautiful to see, I assure you, and it is shameful to profane those august mysteries."¹

These words were written by that sensitive soul who complacently described a certain scene in M. Bergeret's study, and another in a Paris cab, and a score more of the same sort, including that in a farm loft, to which I have already referred—the ugliest, the most offensive I know in literature.² The tears which accompany the passage cited above

¹ *Vie littéraire*, I, 235.

² "But the worst fault of *La Terre* is its gratuitous obscenity. M. Zola's peasants are afflicted with satyriasis. . . . That unhappy village is full of incest. . . . Grandmothers are violated, as I have already regretfully said, by grandsons." France is quite justified of course in condemning Zola's gratuitous obscenity. I am merely calling attention to what seems undue Puritanical intensity on the part of a critic who as a

are the crocodile tears of the man who for the moment has grown tender, because he is writing about somebody he does not like, and tenderness is the appropriate mood for the occasion. But for its length I should reproduce the whole final paragraph of the essay from which I have been quoting. It recalls the pot, which assumed the white purity of alabaster, and was then offended by the blackness of the kettle which never pretended to be anything but a kettle. Here are some sentences from it:

"There is in man an infinite need to love which renders him divine. M. Zola does not know it. Desire and modesty are mingled sometimes with delicious shades in human souls. M. Zola does not know it. There are on earth magnificent forms and noble thoughts; there are pure souls and heroic hearts. M. Zola does not know it. . . ."

Unctuous hymns to holy maternity, to man made divine by love, to modesty, to noble thoughts, pure souls, and heroic hearts strike one as strangely out of tune when they issue from the man who habitually scoffs at decency as an obsolete convention, who knows women not as mothers but as instruments to allay sensual passion,¹ who smiles at the suggestion that some thoughts may be noble and some souls pure, and who leaves heroism and martyrdom to those whose simplicity has made them stubborn.

France's tearfulness is less acceptable than his derision.²

novelist takes keen delight himself in describing the violation of grandmothers by grandsons. See the *Ile des Pingouins*. He praises Maupassant for having demonstrated "the ugliness, the dense stupidity, the savage wile of the human animal." *Vie littéraire*, III, 5.

¹ To the demonstration of the singular narrowness of France's conception of women (animals all cast in the same mould, all heartless, and all without intelligence or imagination, without ideas or ideals), M. Lahy-Hollebecque has devoted an entire volume: *Anatole France et la Femme*, 1923.

² "M. Zola [in his *Rêve*] espouses chastity and so gives us the most edifying example. Only it may be regretted that he celebrates that

The true humanist is neither derisive nor tearful. He dwells in that middle ground which France always overleaps.

8

The quality which predominated in Anatole France by nature's intention was probably sentimentality. But as he grew to manhood, his strong sensual impulse, unspoiled at first, dictated the direction in which his sentimentality was to go, and allied it with aesthetic esotericism. He was always timid, never sure of himself, always a follower: the current of the time made of him a dilettante and a skeptic and transformed gradually the harmless sensualist of the *Noces corinthiennes* and the soft sentimentalist of *Sylvestre Bonnard*, who was ready to see all the world through rose-colored glasses, into the cynical and scabrous chronicler of the *Ile des Pingouins*, the *Dieux ont Soif*, and the *Révolte des Anges*, an artist who has lost his urbanity and moderation, and is finally bereft of all sense of ordinary good taste.

It is through timidity, inability to be a party to himself, impulse to follow the leader, to swim with the current that France the sensualist and sentimentalist was led along step by step in his descent. M. Bergeret "never feared ideas, but he was timid before men."¹

It is customary to show that France's philosophy of life leads to atrophy of the will. It does. But it must have been lack of will and character in the man himself which led him to his philosophy of life. He intervened actively, to be sure, in the Dreyfus Affair. But it is hardly to his credit that all he had said and done during the preceding years

mystic marriage with too much noise and glitter. . . . If it were absolutely necessary to choose, I should prefer to M. Zola winged M. Zola on all fours." *Vie littéraire*, II, 285-286.

¹ *Mannequin d'Osier*, 201.

renders it difficult to explain why he took any action at all, and especially why he aligned himself with the Dreyfusards rather than with their opponents.

France may sing enthusiastically from time to time of action:

"They [the inhabitants of Utopia] are wise and yet they are worth nothing, for worth is in effort, and only in effort. Of what profit is it to them that their life should be long if they do not fill it, if they do not live it?"¹

"'I must act since I am alive,' says Wagner's homunculus. And, in fact, living is acting. Unhappily the speculative spirit renders man unfit for action. Empire is not for those who want to know everything. To wish to see beyond one's immediate goal is an infirmity."²

He may praise effort and action in this manner occasionally, as occasionally he praises religion, and heroism, and decency, but he has given his life to the task of sapping the firm confidence which justifies all effort and inspires all action. Rabelais, Montaigne, Pascal, Molière, Voltaire have taught us how to make the best of the bad job of living—not Renan, however, and, most decidedly, not Anatole France. There have always been dilettantes in the world, handsome drones; they will always exist; they will do no harm unless they set out to preach their gospel militantly—and succeed. Anatole France has been a militant dilettante, and a successful one, like his contemporary, Oscar Wilde. Dilettanteism is in its implications the direct denial of humanism, at the root of which is a belief in man and action, a confidence in man's power in some measure to make his own destiny. Far from leading to atrophy of the will, as dilettanteism does, its primary aim is to develop character

¹ *Jardin d'Epicure*, 62.

² *Ibid.*, 120-121; compare *Vie littéraire*, I, 14.

by fortifying the will. "Our bodies are our gardens," says the humanist, "to the which our wills are gardeners; . . . power and corrigible authority . . . lies in our wills; . . . one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality . . . ; we have reason to cool our carnal stings."

Dilettanteism is a malady of the will. Effort and the willingness to undergo discipline are the exercise of the will and the essence of humanism. France hated effort. That is one of the reasons why he hated Stoicism: "Stoicism is a bore, even as disclosed by Marcus Aurelius, and he is not an artist. As much or more may be said of all the doctrines which exact too much effort of human nature."¹ Dilettanteism not only disparages effort and action, and proposes the sterile, amused contemplation of the spectator; it strikes at all sound life by preaching the futility of thought, and, by paralyzing the will, it withers the stock from which character springs.

¹ Discourse read at the banquet of the Friends of Montaigne, June 8, 1912. Quoted by Giraud, 307.

CHAPTER III

THE SOCIALIST

1

I HAVE spoken of the bewilderment experienced by his friends and his enemies when suddenly the prince of dilettantes strode forth into the arena of action. Amazement was caused not only because the spectator had become an active participant in a critical contest but because he had apparently gone over to the side of the enemy.

As late as the end of 1896 the candidacy of Anatole France for the Academy was supported by the conservatives. He expressed freely the highest admiration for Jules Lemaître and Paul Bourget, and supreme detestation of Emile Zola. Then came the Affair. France the aristocrat, the conservative, the former Boulangist, the defender of the army,¹ the prophet of indifference, the apologist of things as they are because meddling with them would only make them worse, joins hands with Zola ("one of those wretches about whom it may be said that it would have been better had they never been born") against the elegant Bourget, the exquisite Lemaître, the clericals, and the army. France, the scoffer at human worth, human progress, democracy, and justice, suddenly becomes the apostle of justice—and soon a socialist with all the hopes and illusions of socialism in regard

¹ *Vie littéraire*, I, 73 ff.; III, 234; preface to C. Benoit's translation of *Faust*, 1891.

to justice, human worth, human progress, and democracy.

He had never prized justice before:

"As a matter of fact," he had said, "we are not much interested in justice. In the philosophic sense of the word, it is nothing; in the vulgar sense, it is the most forlorn of the virtues. No one wishes to have anything to do with it. Faith opposes to it grace, and nature, love. Let a man declare that he is just, and he immediately inspires in others a veritable repulsion. Justice is an object of horror to things and beings."¹

We know what his opinion had been in regard to those causes for which men have been willing to fight and die, how the stubbornness of martyrs had offended his detached soul. He has changed his mind. Now the folly of Saint Joan of Arc seems to him

"wiser than wisdom, for it was the folly of martyrdom, without which nothing great and useful has yet been established in the world. Cities, empires, republics are founded on sacrifice."²

We have seen how bitterly he resented the practise of self-control praised by the Stoics. He had treated as a childish illusion their dream of world peace to follow upon the triumph of the doctrine of the brotherhood of man. ("Everywhere thou art a citizen of the city of the world," says Marcus Aurelius). But now he accepts it:

"I believe in the future union of peoples and I appeal for it with that ardent love of humanity which, formed in the Latin conscience at the time of Epictetus and Seneca, and extinguished for so many centuries by European barbarism, has been reilluminated in the loftiest hearts of modern ages."³

The cosmopolitan ideal of the Stoics was built upon the preliminary self-perfection of the individual through self-restraint and self-discipline. France's federation of the

¹ *Vie littéraire*, I, 158.

² *Jeanne d'Arc*, lxxv.

³ *Ibid.*, lxxiii.

world, it need hardly be said, is of the nineteenth century type. His socialism, too, expounded in *Monsieur Bergeret à Paris*, takes its rosy color from the humanitarianism of '48. It will not cure the ills of society by striking at the source of all evil where the Stoics found it—in the breast of the individual. It will begin at the other end; that is, not with the perfection of the individual, but with the perfection of the state. By purely external operations—changes in the social order—it will make men “gentle and benevolent toward one another,” for “when the laws are just, men will be just.”¹

We have apparently become corrigible now that we are all thought of together, whereas, taken singly, we are probably still incurably “harsh, egotistical, jealous, sensual, ferocious.” So France, who had always looked upon society as bad and unimprovable, took up the banner of the regeneration of mankind in the lump, lent his eloquence to proletarian meetings as long as his strength lasted,² marched through Paris with his comrades in protest against the acquittal of Jaurès’s murderer, and felt so strongly that the cause for the sake of which he had forsaken his splendid isolation was world-wide in scope, that he spoke out in defense of Sacco and Vanzetti, prisoners in distant New England.

Overnight, as it were, France at the age of fifty-three is made into a new man, no longer looking upon all change as futile, but preaching changes of a very radical nature.

Here is what the Anatole France of before 1897 thought of the desirability of change:

“I am persuaded that the sum of stupidity and folly in the world is at all times constant. . . . Far from rejoicing when I see an old error depart, I think of the new error which will come

¹ *Monsieur Bergeret à Paris*, 244, 93.

² See the touching episode in Gsell, 17–19.

to take its place, and I wonder anxiously if it will not be more inconvenient or more dangerous than the first." ¹

The Abbé Coignard thought that "the maintenance of public order is only organized violence and every man is his own judge of how much interest he is to take in it."

"For my part," he declared, "I take little interest in what is done in the council-chamber of the prince, observing that the course of life is not changed thereby, that after the reforms men are, as before, egotistical, avaricious, cowardly, and cruel, stupid and mad by turns." ²

The good Abbé, we remember, approved the old woman of Syracuse; and he "did not see very much difference between the governments that are called absolute and those that are called free. . . . He would never have been a revolutionary. He had too few illusions for that, and he did not think that governments ought to be destroyed otherwise than by those blind hidden forces, slow and irresistible, which carry away everything." ³

From this attitude of mind to that which embraces advanced socialism and collectivism is a far cry.

2

Consistency is not the greatest of virtues. "Souls absolutely free from all illogicality frighten me," says

¹ *Jardin d'Épicure*, 85-86.

² *Opinions de Jérôme Coignard*, 106; compare *Jardin d'Épicure*, 147; *Vie littéraire*, IV, 48; *Sur la Pierre blanche*, 318; etc. Consider also:

"The populace is wise indeed when it considers that it has nothing to gain and nothing to lose by a change of master." *Opinions de Jérôme Coignard*, 202.

"I am entirely indifferent to the form of government." *Ibid.*, 205.

"Only a skeptic will be always moral, and a good citizen. A skeptic never revolts against the laws, for he has no hope that good ones can be made." *Vie littéraire*, I, iii.

³ *Opinions de Jérôme Coignard*, 28-30.

France.¹ He is supported by the words of his master, Renan: "Woe to the man who does not contradict himself at least once a day." It is true that there is danger in consistency. But when Renan and France make a virtue of inconsistency, it is difficult to follow them. As a matter of fact, it is only partially true that there is danger in consistency; it is partially true also that consistency is an indispensable condition of right thinking.

Inconsistency in matters of little importance is to be expected, and may even be a mark of intellectual suppleness; but inconsistency which is fundamental, striking at the very center of one's philosophy of life, is hardly permissible.

France declares that he never built up a philosophical system, but he is over-modest. He had, despite all his protestations, a philosophy of life. It was, negatively, the denial of the validity of all philosophies of life; and, positively, a frank hedonism.

Mr. Mencken, speaking of Wells, says very properly: "Even if he hold that life is essentially meaningless (as Conrad does, and Dreiser, and Hardy, and Anatole France), he must at least display that meaninglessness with reasonable clarity and consistency."

Mr. Mencken has accurately pointed out the center of France's philosophy of life: life is meaningless. He is right in asking that that meaninglessness be displayed with reasonable consistency. He is probably satisfied that his condition has been met in the case of Anatole France, doubtless because he thinks that the great France is the France of before the Dreyfus Affair, or because he ignores entirely France the socialist, or because he realizes that after all there never was a real change, that the great France continued the

¹ *Vie littéraire*, II, iii.

tradition of *Thaïs* and of the *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque* in the *Ile des Pingouins*, the *Dieux ont Soif*, and the *Révolte des Anges*, while only a shadow of the great France, totally detached from the latter, an object of some amusement to him, went about making "uplift" speeches.

For there really never was a change in France. He had always been two men in one. I have spoken of the conflict between his skeptical head and his sentimental heart. In his habitual manner he generalizes what he finds true of himself, judging other people by himself, in accordance with the ordinary human practise: "We all have in ourselves," he says, "a Don Quixote and a Sancho Panza. We listen to both, and even when it is Sancho who persuades us, it is Don Quixote who deserves our admiration."¹ As far as 1897 Sancho's voice was persuasive enough to silence Don Quixote's—almost, but not quite, as we have seen. After 1897 Don Quixote's voice was strong, but it never gained a lasting ascendancy. If Don Quixote carries the master to a gathering of "uplifters" in the afternoon, Sancho gets his revenge by keeping him up all night while he dictates a chapter of the *Dieux ont Soif* in which the "uplifters" are hissed in scorn.²

In the old days when Sancho's voice was persuasive, and Don Quixote's still and small, the great Revolution, the fountainhead of humanitarian socialism, was, it will be remembered, a thing of horror to the Abbé Coignard: "M. l'Abbé Coignard . . . would not have signed a line of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, because of the excessive and iniquitous distinction that is established in it between man and the gorilla."

¹ *Sylvestre Bonnard*, 145.

² The date of publication of France's works may be found in the Appendix to this volume.

The editor of the memoirs of the Abbé Coignard approved the latter's opinion and argued that the nineteenth century has suffered intolerably from the application of the principles which the voice of Don Quixote champions:

"The remarks of the Abbé Coignard show a prophetic disdain of those grand principles of the Revolution and of those rights of democracy on which we have established in the last hundred years, with all sorts of violence and usurpation, an incoherent succession of insurrectional governments, while condemning insurrections—unconscious of the irony. If we began to smile a little at all these absurdities, which seemed august and were sometimes bloody, . . . quarrels would be less lively in the most beautiful country in the world."¹

Don Quixote has his say in the three small volumes called *Vers les Temps meilleurs*—title of hopeful augury!—in which are gathered together the radical and anti-clerical utterances of many years; and in other similar works.

During all this time, however, the voice of Sancho will not down. It is heard even in that volume which properly belongs to Don Quixote: *Monsieur Bergeret à Paris*. There the good professor of Latin eloquently foretells the coming of the ideal state, the socialistic or communistic democracy. And Sancho retorts: "It is science, and not the people, in which sovereignty resides. Nonsense repeated by thirty-six millions of mouths is still nonsense. Majorities have usually shown a superior aptitude for slavery."²

It is in this book that Bissolo, Citizen Bissolo, says of the "people": "It is not easy to make an ass which is not thirsty drink;" and, "If the crowd ever takes you lovingly into its arms, you will soon discover the vastness of its im-

¹ *Opinions de Jérôme Coignard*, 25–26, 36–38.

² *Monsieur Bergeret à Paris*, 168.

potence and of its cowardice;" and, "The simple truth is that the education of the people is scarcely begun. In the brain of the workingman, in the place where the bourgeois lodge their inept, cruel prejudices, there is a big hole. That has to be filled. It will be done, but it will take a long time."¹

Before that time comes, says Sancho, who has begun to feel that Bissolo's belief in progress and the perfectibility of man is quixotic,—before that time comes, says Sancho in the last chapter of the *Ile des Pingouins*, the abominable inhabitants of this planet will be destroyed by that science "in which sovereignty resides." In this history of the Penguins Sancho-France heaps ridicule upon his old enemy, the Church, and his new friends, Dreyfusards and socialists.

But it is in the *Dieux ont Soif* that the France of before 1897 reappears most impenitently and unabashedly. Léon Daudet himself could not have treated the Revolution and its ideals with more sarcastic spleen. "The *Dieux ont Soif*," said M. Le Goff² to the master one day, "is certainly the most reactionary work, and the most severe on the Revolution, that has been written since Joseph de Maistre." The presiding genius of the book, who impersonates the author himself, is a *ci-devant*, the epicurean Brotteaux, whose remarks must make the contemporary radical shudder.³

Sancho succeeds in gaining a hearing in that very book in which M. Bergeret foretells the future ideal state, for Bissolo is really in his service. Again, in *Sur la Pierre blanche*, Don Quixote vigorously outlines the socialistic Utopia. Then a little chapter of three pages is appended,

¹ *Monsieur Bergeret à Paris*, 166, 167, 168.

² P. 253.

³ See pp. 79, 83, 120–121, 123–124, 133, 148–149, 166–167, 198, 214.

in which Sancho speaks through the lips of four interlocutors who have taken part in the preceding dialogue, and by a four-fold stroke proves that the ideal which has just been unfolded is, in the opinion of the master, little more than an idle fancy:

Says Nicole Langelier: "You seem to have been sleeping on the white stone in the midst of dream-people."

Says Josephin Leclerc: "It is not probable that the future will be such as you have seen it. I do not desire the advent of socialism, but I do not fear it. Collectivism, if it attained control, would be quite another thing than what is expected. Who was it who said, returning mentally to the time of Constantine and of the first victories of the Church: 'Christianity triumphs. But it triumphs under the conditions imposed by life on all political and religious parties. All, whatever they may be, are transformed so completely during the struggle that after their victory there remains of them nothing but their name and some symbols of their lost thought.'"

Says Giacomo Boni, who in the course of certain excavations had descended from the present age to the stone age: "In sum, humanity changes little. What will be, will be that which was."

Says Jean Boilly: "No doubt man, or what we call man, changes little. . . . But what reason have we to believe that man is the final term of the evolution of life on the earth? . . . A future race, sprung perhaps from ours, its origin perhaps linked with us by no bond, will succeed us in the government of this planet. These new geniuses of the earth will be ignorant of us or will despise us. The monuments of our arts, if they discover traces of them, will have no meaning for them. Future masters, whose mind we can no more divine than the palaeopithecus of the Simalik moun-

tains could forecast the thought of Aristotle, Newton, and Poincaré.”¹

3

France has probably been a support to socialism among people who never read him, and know only that he lent his great name and prestige to the cause. But it is surprising that he should be welcomed as an ally by those socialists who know his books. Before his socialistic days, the doctrine of progress seemed absurd to him; and even in the works written after 1897, his opinion, though somewhat confused, was still preponderantly antagonistic to the idea of progress. He had, at bottom, no confidence in economic or social legislation.² He despised or distrusted the wisdom of the majority.³ The education necessary to the satisfactory conduct of a socialistic state seemed to him to require thousands of years. He embraced socialism in the mood of the man who has seen all other forms of government fail; and who thinks that since they have all been tried and all been found unjust and inept, we might as well try socialism, which will, in the end, he has no doubt, prove as unjust and inept as its predecessors.

There are many such socialists. They are, assuredly, not beneficial adherents to the cause, which justifiably asks for more unconditional faith. Of the two men who lived side by side in the same body from 1897 on, it is not France the

¹ *Sur la Pierre blanche*, 317-320; compare *Jardin d'Epicure*, 27, 150, and *Vie en Fleur*, quoted below, p. 155.

² "The National Convention had set a maximum sale-price for bread; immediately grain and flour had disappeared." *Dieux ont Soif*, 74. Compare *Opinions de Jérôme Coignard*, 108-110.

³ It was the tyranny of the majority among the Athenians which caused the exile of Anaxagoras and the death of Socrates. *Sur la Pierre blanche*, 78.

socialist and humanitarian who will be remembered, for he has left little or nothing that could be considered likely to last. It is not the voice of Don Quixote, not the outpourings of a sentimental heart, that will remain. It is the product of the skeptical head, detached and unsympathetic, it is the voice of before 1897 still heard after 1897, that will remain to plague socialism and all other idealistic causes.

That France is really the enemy of socialism as he is the enemy of all types of idealism (and of the numerous varieties of socialism, all, or almost all, are frankly idealistic) has not always been seen. It has not been generally noted that in almost all of his work that is widely known, except in the volumes of personal reminiscence, he is constantly on the side of those who deride idealism.

The land of the Soviets is unusually discriminating, if I may trust a note which appeared in the *Post Literary Review* of January 26, 1924:

“The works of Anatole France have just been put on the index by the Soviet Republic. The Bolshevik censor charges that they have too much spirit [apparently a mistranslation of *esprit*, “wit”] and too little idealism.”

If the note is inaccurate, it was written at any rate by somebody who sees things as they are, and who is more consistent in important matters, where it is desirable to be consistent, than Anatole France himself. Some, at least, of the French socialist leaders were apprehensive as to the effect of France’s work. France repeated to M. Le Goff the expostulation which one of his books had called forth from Hervé. “I remember,” he said, “that several years ago, just after I had published the *Dieux ont Soif*, I went with some friends to lunch at a coöperative restaurant in Paris. I had no

sooner entered a vast hall full of people than I was hailed by Gustave Hervé.

"'Well, France,' cried he, 'I've read your last book. Fine, fine, I must say! You're becoming a reactionary, France. You're attacking the Revolution. Wrong track, France, wrong track.'"¹

It may be that the literary-critical acumen of the Bolshevik censor was sharpened by a statement made to the newspapers by France in 1921, at the time that he went to Stockholm to receive the Nobel prize "for the most remarkable literary work of idealistic stamp." He had been more or less openly a communist.² At Stockholm he announced a change in his economic and social opinions: "I am no longer a communist in any sense of the word," he said to the press. "Though I dislike capitalism, and especially plutocracy, as much as ever, I am convinced of the impracticability of the communist programme. We must honor the right to private property and private ownership in general. I feel that for the purposes of civilization and human happiness the system that obtains in France is the best. There the wealth of the country is distributed among and held by a very large number of small holders and owners."³

These are the words of a good bourgeois: how the mighty France has fallen! But perhaps he was only joking, and the journalists had no sense of humor.

France gave his life to vitiating in his contemporaries the well-springs of action, and then in his old age he would build up what he had destroyed. Having smiled at man and all his capacities, not recoiling before the use of the epithet "imbecile"; having denied man's power to win his way

¹ Le Goff, 81.

² See Gsell, 263, 285; Le Goff, 213; Corday, 116.

³ Quoted in various American newspapers and journals.

toward wisdom and virtue; having treated as vain and illusory man's reason and all his sciences and arts; having tainted the mental and moral being of those who took his sermons to heart; having taken delight in sowing broadcast the seeds of destruction, he finally steps forth, the illumined apostle of salvation through humanitarianism.¹ No writer of the late nineteenth century did more than France to undermine man's confidence in man; in the twentieth he enrolled himself in the army which would bring order out of chaos by a confidence in man which to many must seem chimerical.

As we read Bergeret's idyllic description of the future republic, wherein there will be no rich and no poor, where all wealth will belong to all, where the state will possess everything and consequently nothing, where the antagonism between state and individual will disappear in the identity of the two,—as we read this idyll which in slightly varying form has been a familiar dream of the world for more than a century and a half,—no, for much longer than that,—we recognize that the approach of the millennium is perfectly possible on one condition: that men become very different from what they are now.

¹ Describing the future ideal collectivist state in *Sur la Pierre blanche*, France rejects utterly the ideas of liberty, equality, fraternity as contrary to nature. He substitutes for all these the great principle of harmony—the harmony imagined by Fourier, whom, a few years before, through the lips of M. Bergeret, he had denounced as a mere dreamer. *Sur la Pierre blanche*, 297–298; *Monsieur Bergeret à Paris*, 38–39.

In addition to humanitarian sentiment, Anatole France the socialist relies upon science and the power of thought to create the new era. "Despite all brutal appetites," he said in 1910, "despite all modes of violence, the force which governs the world is Thought." *Aux Etudiants*, 37. For his confidence in science, see *Vers les Temps meilleurs* and other similar volumes, *passim*. Science and thought he scoffed at before the time of the Affair, and he still continued to deride them in his literary work after that date.

There are three much-discussed avenues to progress: evolution of the race, modification of institutions, alteration of accepted views of public and private morality. The first, France dallies with frequently in a pseudo-scientific way, but he has nothing of value to offer on the subject, and considers it of no practical importance. To the second, in his socialistic enthusiasm,¹ he accords the utmost significance: though human nature will not improve, the conditions of man's life are susceptible of amelioration. But it is the third avenue to progress, ignored entirely, I think, by Anatole France, which the humanist considers all-important: the establishment in the world of sound ethical principles which every man must abide by, on pain of being ostracized as unsocial. A new, more enlightened, ethic to govern the relations of men to one another, proscribing dishonesty, greed which is satisfied at the expense of others, disloyalty to oneself and to one's neighbors, and all other social vices which stamp a man as incompletely human—this new ethic, it has long been clear, the world is in sore need of, and it cannot be given currency by a mere modification of institutions. Changes in our social machinery are futile surely, if we expect from them the creation of a radically better world—a world in which intelligence and justice shall rule. They may prove very helpful if we regard them merely as a preliminary step to the real work which may then begin—the building of a new and better ethic and the getting it accepted by the world. Anatole France the socialist stops short at the preliminary step: he paints glowing pictures of the new world which is to be brought into being by a few changes in our social machinery.

The Anatole France who belongs rather to literature than

¹ *M. Bergeret à Paris*, 245, 258; *Sur la Pierre blanche*; *Vers les Temps meilleurs* and other propagandist works; Corday, 111 ff.

to politics is decidedly skeptical about the possibility of our making even this preliminary step. He expended himself to prove that both man and his institutions are incapable of progress. Furthermore, the Anatole France who belongs to literature represents all the enticements which tend to debilitate mankind and render impossible every type of millennium, especially the socialistic millennium.

Institutions cannot be better than the men who guide them. France is right when he says that "men are less ferocious when they are less miserable";¹ but the mere amelioration of social conditions will not make men, in any really significant degree, more just, more generous, and more reasonable than they are now. Ethical improvement must keep pace with social improvement, and if the socialized state set about the task of directing the new ethical education of those citizens whom it has emancipated from the yoke of wretchedness, one master whose works it would not throw open for all to read is the creator of Jérôme Coignard, the author of the *Jardin d'Epicure*, of the *Lys rouge*, the *Histoire comique*, and the *Révolte des Anges*. Socialism triumphant would certainly approve the opinion of the anonymous author of the note I quoted a moment ago purporting to express the views of the Bolshevik censor. It would repudiate the author of the *Ile des Pingouins* and of the *Dieux ont Soif*; but it would condemn even more vigorously the works mentioned above, in which Anatole France appears as the apostle of amused and futile skepticism, and as the spurious humanist who has no confidence in man's power to rise above his ordinary self, and who scoffs at the possibility, or even the desirability, of the development of will and character. Civic Virtue, which is more necessary in the socialistic state, perhaps, than in any other, may well be the issue of the true humanistic discipline;

¹ *M. Bergeret à Paris*, 245.

it can hardly encounter a more potent and insidious enemy than dilettanteism.

Bergeret's ideal republic, he himself confesses, is perhaps only an unrealizable dream. It had been suggested before the Anatole France of literature added his share of proof, that this old dream was founded on an unsound conception of the capacities of mankind. Man is probably not so ferocious as he is painted by the Abbé Coignard; nor does he seem to possess the angelic potentialities dreamed by M. Bergeret. I say "dreamed" for we should not do this amiable scholar the injustice to imply that he is as naïve as some of the extremists among his political brothers. He recognized as fully as his friend Bissolo that it will be a long time before the world has undergone a sufficient metamorphosis to render realizable his Abbey of Thélème (*style de Rousseau*), his phalanstery, his Fruitlands. Many of us do not fully share Bissolo's pessimistic opinion of either the workingman or the bourgeois; and we shake our heads at his confidence in education. We do not share his pessimism; nor do we share his optimism. We hope for improvement; but we are skeptical of the possibility of radically changing human nature, and Anatole France himself has taught us to attach little importance to changes in political and social institutions.

We listened too long to Coignard. Bergeret is a dreamer, but he may well be more nearly right than Coignard. And yet Bergeret will die long before Coignard ceases to delight readers. Here, in epitome, is the evidence that France will prove injurious to the cause of socialism.

The Abbé Coignard looked upon man as closely allied to the gorilla. Progress (even that which means nothing more than improved social conditions) is not likely of course in a society composed of gorillas. After France became a

socialist, we might well have expected him to look more favorably upon the possibility of advance. Not so, however. Bissolo is pessimistic, but M. Dubois in the *Vie en Fleur* (1922) is hopeless: he sees ahead of us not progress, but retrogression. Before his conversion to socialism, France was inclined to believe that progress is effected only by those evolutionary processes which begin to produce results after thousands of years. And long before that length of time elapses, he assures us again and again both before 1897 and after, the world will be destroyed either by a beneficent chemist or by the extinction of the sun.¹ M. Dubois is convinced that the Dark Ages are upon us. France agrees with him.

"I think now," he says, "that all of us, every one of us, great and small, will have no more posterity than the last writers of Latin antiquity, and that the new Europe will be too different from the Europe which at this moment descends into the abyss under our very eyes to care anything about our arts and our thought. Since I am not a prophet, I did not foresee the frightful ruin which is soon to overtake our civilization when at the age of thirty-seven, in the middle of the road of my life, I transformed little Anatole into little Pierre."²

One who believes that "the last man will be as naked as the first" may quite consistently be a dilettante and a hedonist, but he will certainly prove an uncomfortable bed-fellow for socialists, whose effort to improve the world is futile and foolish if progress is illusory and retrogression certain, if we are to have no posterity, and if the races of the future "will be ignorant of us or will despise us."

Even after he has become a socialist, France still looks

¹ See above, pp. 58, 66.

² *Vie en Fleur*, 343-344; compare *Sur la Pierre blanche*, quoted above, p. 148.

upon men as closely related to gorillas, that is, as only slightly improved during all the ages which have elapsed since their arboreal days. The Socrates of the *Histoire comique* (1903), the doctor of the novel, says: "A man's brain is bigger and richer in convolutions than that of a gorilla, but there is no essential difference between them." This was his rejoinder to the following observation of a journalist: "Every time I have opened a door by mistake, literally and figuratively, I have discovered an unsuspected ignominy. If suddenly society turned itself inside out like a glove, and we saw what was within, we should all fall swooning with disgust and fright."¹

Two years before his death France returns to the same theme:

"I have already said that I was tempted to follow Jean-Jacques in defying any man to declare himself better than I. I hasten to add that I say this without much self-esteem. I believe men in general more wicked than they appear. They do not show themselves as they really are: they hide themselves to commit acts which would make them hated or despised, and show themselves when they are acting in a way to make them approved or admired. I have rarely opened a door by mistake without discovering a spectacle which made me look upon humanity with pity, disgust, or horror."²

I have commented on France's habitual extravagance, his lack of moderation. The immoderateness of his thought, and frequently of his expression, has cast discredit upon the doctrines which he espoused: upon the cult of beauty and sense, upon the theories of curiosity and detachment and philosophic pessimism, upon humanism, skepticism—and socialism. It should not be a matter of surprise that since his death reactionaries have insisted more and more ve-

¹ Pp. 210-212.

² *Vie en Fleur*, 247-248.

hemently that Anatole France was at heart one of them.¹

He was certainly a dubious and dangerous ally of progressive groups, literary as well as political. Charles Maurras, a man who has been admired even by his enemies, and they are numerous, maintained in an essay published in honor of France's eightieth birthday,² that France had always, both before and after the Affair, really belonged to his party, that of the *Action française*, the party of the conservatives. France had of course no sympathy for the clerical tendencies of this party. Nor was he a royalist;³ but he certainly could not be called a convinced republican. Maurras is surely right when he declares that the Abbé Lantaigne has the better of the argument with M. Bergeret. Lantaigne-France makes a passionate and powerful assault on the Republic, which ends with the following words: "And all the evils which I have sketched summarily belong to the Republic and proceed naturally from it. The Republic is essentially bad." Bergeret's reply is precisely what is to be expected from Anatole France, a dilettante from the beginning of his life to the end—and dilettantes do not make good socialists: "The régime is about as you represent it; and it is still the régime that I prefer. All bonds are lax; the result is that the state is weakened, but individuals are re-

¹ See, for instance, Le Goff; Roujon, *La Vie et les Opinions d'Anatole France*, 1925; the *Chronique des Lettres françaises*, *passim*; in addition to the little book of Maurras referred to below.

² *Anatole France, Politique de Poète*, 1924.

³ M. Le Goff (p. 223) quotes France as saying in regard to some verses of his in praise of Maurras: "They are old. They date from the time when Maurras was not more of a royalist than I; and I was almost one." M. Le Goff would have us believe that France continued to be something of a royalist even in his last years (see pp. 106, 166, 205, 255, 261 ff.), but his evidence must be viewed with suspicion since he himself is very clearly a defender of the reactionary policy. France's contempt for democracy was so great that he doubtless frequently praised the monarchy for no other purpose than to cast discredit on the Republic.

lieved, and a certain easy existence and liberty are secured. . . . The lack of secrecy and of continuity renders all enterprises impossible to the democratic Republic. . . . I was raised under the Empire, surrounded by love for the Republic. 'The Republic is justice,' said my father, a professor of rhetoric at the 'lycée' of Saint-Omer. He did not know the Republic. It is not justice, but it is easy existence."¹

France was timid. Everything new positively frightened him, especially if it threatened his epicurean calm. In the matter of politics he was for a long time a "stand-patter," not because present conditions were satisfactory but because there seemed no likelihood that they could become better. The only real love of his life, aside from the love of pleasure, was for art—the art of the past, of old Greece, old Rome, old France. It is true that the *Vie littéraire* is generous to some young writers, but only to those who because of their mediocrity do not threaten the rule of the past.² The past for him began with Greece and ended with the Parnassians.³ He fought all the artistic movements of the last half of the nineteenth century which were not of the past but of the present, and promised to be of the future, as every reader of the *Vie littéraire* knows well. He was hostile to the doctrines and the works of symbolists, naturalists, decadents,

¹ *Orme du Mail*, 228–231. Compare, *contra*: *Opinions de Jérôme Coignard*, 29, 36, 111, 123; and: "Not that I am fool enough to think myself more free in a republic than in a monarchy. On the contrary, there is no country where individual liberty is less respected than in France." *Révolte des Anges*, 130.

² "In the four volumes of France's critical writings there is hardly an allusion to any of the writers who were struggling in the early '90ies for recognition." Ernest Boyd, *Studies from Ten Literatures*, 23.

³ At times he felt that it ended even earlier. He said one day to his secretary: "Good periods are all periods except ours. In literature, the last good period ended with Nodier. In painting, with Ingres. As for furniture, nothing graceful has been made since the Consulate." Brousson, 67. Compare Ségur, 150 ff.

impressionists. In his attitude to literature he was not merely conservative; he was positively reactionary. When he was still a relatively young man, before he had written *Thaïs*, or the *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque*, he replied to a question as to what trend the literature of the future was to take with a letter which Charles Maurras or any other traditionalist would have gladly signed. The letter is headed *To-morrow*, and appears in the second series of the *Vie littéraire* (1890).

"Oh! how I should like to be in communion with the new literature," he says, "in sympathy with the works of the future! I wish I could celebrate the verse and the 'prose' of the decadents. I wish I could join the ranks of the boldest impressionists, fight with them and for them. But that would mean to fight in darkness, for I am perfectly blind when I look upon that verse and that prose; and you know that Ajax himself, the bravest of the Greeks who were before Troy, prayed Zeus that he might fight and perish in the light of day. . . . I am nearer to a poor savage than to a decadent. I cannot conceive what impressionism is. Symbolism astounds me. . . . Naturalism fell immediately into the ignoble. Having descended to the lowest degree of platitude and vulgarity, barren of all intellectual and plastic beauty, ugly and stupid, it disgusted all refined readers."

He then proceeds to advise young writers ("There, sir, is the advice I make bold to give to our young men") in the terms which Boileau used two hundred years before. "The fine periods of art," he says finally, "have been those when harmony and tradition reigned."

There is no reason to doubt that this essay and the one immediately following it express France's convictions in regard to the literary movements of his day, and certainly he never changed his mind in any important respect, though, for reasons which have no concern with literature, the Dreyfus Affair, for instance, he occasionally modified his tone.

In the two essays mentioned, he treats Symbolism disdainfully. But in the fourth volume of the *Vie littéraire* appears an essay on Jean Moréas which seems to constitute a reversal of opinion. It caused something of a furor, the echoes of which are preserved in Huret's *Enquête sur l'Évolution littéraire* (1891). The first fact to be noted is that the commendation of Symbolism in this essay is rather in the nature of toleration than of praise. The second fact is that even the toleration is only half-hearted. France explained his intentions to Huret: "I took up the defense of the new school because of the strangely ungenerous determination of their predecessors to fight them." This is a good moral reason for entering on a campaign, but it naturally tends to discredit the integrity of the critic. A critic is bound to stand for what he thinks is right, in spite of the defects which he finds in those who think as he does. If it is true, as I believe it is, that this endorsement of Symbolism is even more insincere than its lack of enthusiasm expressly indicates, the explanation of France's action may be where it was found at the time: in his perverse spirit of contradiction, his aversion to seeing anything accepted (except that which belongs to the days of old) and his consequent desire through praise of the new school to do injury to the established school. Huysmans was sure that the whole thing was "a grand mystification concocted by Anatole France to pester the Parnassians." He considered it impossible that France should really believe what he said. Rémy de Gourmont declared: "To play us that trick, the huge assurance of a fraud like Anatole France is required, that ever-discredited critic, who, when a new work of art appears, discourses the first week on La Fontaine, the second on Boileau, the third on Jeanne d'Arc. . . . In literary matters, nothing is more abject than hypocrisy. Nothing is more

criminal, when chance has made you dispenser of reputations, than to refuse to give yourself without reserve to the service of talent." Quillard said: "As a critic, France is not very kindly disposed toward the 'Young Writers' and has, for example, always carefully remained silent concerning Ephraïm Mikhaël and Henri de Régnier, the best among us." Descaves, another *Jeune*, is more emphatic: "Never, you understand me," he said, "never has Anatole France deigned to speak of the work of the 'Young Writers.' If only he discussed them! But no, nothing. Oh, if from time to time he launches a Moréas, because he knows that he is of no consequence . . . , does that count? But if a book of real value is published, you will read in the *Temps*, during the month in which it appears, an article on Pascal, another on the 'Life of the Saints,' a third on a sonnet of Boileau!"¹

Maurras was right: there was no real change in France; he was always at heart a conservative and a traditionalist;² not, to be sure, like the soldiers of the *Action française*, for their political and religious views were never his. He was a traditionalist because of his ardent and lasting love for the art of the past, because of his timidity and lack of independence, his natural indolence, and his fear that anything new would disturb the "easy existence and liberty" so dear to a dilettante. Such a man could never become a convinced socialist.

France, I have been trying to show, has greatly damaged the cause of socialism, and in the years to come the injury will become more and more evident, for the *Dieux ont Soif*

¹ Huret, *Enquête sur l'Evolution littéraire*, 6, 139, 180, 250, 344.

² He apparently did not like the appellation. "Traditionalism is a mania with Maurras," he is reported as saying. "It's his hobby. He will prove to you that you are a traditionalist without knowing it." Brousson, 274.

will live long after the time when *Vers les Temps meilleurs*, which has never been widely read except among those who were already converted to its views, is utterly forgotten.

4

France did not allow himself to consider seriously what the perfected, socialized state would do with those individuals who enjoyed his books and adopted his gospel of sensuality and purposeless intellectual curiosity. Of course he did ask himself from time to time what the rule of the proletariat would mean to him and to his kind; but he knew that the question was purely "academic," since, despite even *his* championship of advanced doctrines, no radical change in the state of affairs was to be feared during the few years which remained to him.

He was rarely tender to the Herd, except when he was addressing it. "*Pecus*," says M. Bergeret, "does not reflect. . . . He never doubts, since doubt is the result of reflection. However, his ideas change ceaselessly. And sometimes he passes from stupidity to violence."¹ The *Chanteur de Kyme*² was written to prove the melancholy fate of the poet who is surrounded by ignorant and violent men. Like his *Brotteaux des Ilettes*, France doubtless determined "never to run counter to the popular sentiment, especially when it is absurd and ferocious."

"This aristocrat," says M. Le Goff,³ speaking of the master, praised to the skies the dirty, brutal moujiks. They had, for him, the soul of heroes. He hoped they would have imitators in France, whose first care would doubtless be to treat him to the fate of *Brotteaux des Ilettes*—to permit him to lament the splendors of the

¹ *Anneau d'Améthyste*, 261-262.

² In the volume entitled *Clio*.

³ Pp. 120 ff.

past in a wretched garret, while waiting for the guillotine. I had occasion to discuss this matter with Mademoiselle Laprévotte, who confided to me certain curious facts. 'M. France,' said she, 'has a horror of nothing so much as of a popular audience. He is ill when he has to make a speech in a labor college or in a workingmen's quarter. He has a feeling that his harmonious phrases are not appropriate to a public which has no sense of their beauty. Every effort on his part to go to the people is painful, and every time that he does it, he returns discouraged. At bottom he feels that he is very far from them, that there is something factitious in his attitude; but he perseveres for reasons which he has not entrusted to me. He knows very well that if there were a popular uprising, he would be the first victim, and that is why he asked himself, in the *Dieux ont Soif*, what would happen to M. France in a period of riot. The result was Brotteaux.' I observed to Mademoiselle Laprévotte that however powerful the master's imagination might be, he could not conceive what the reality might have been, nor how he would have conducted himself. 'What you say is very true,' she replied; 'but he thinks he would have been like Brotteaux. Nobody knows anything about it, and he doesn't either.'"

Nobody knows, to be sure, but Mademoiselle Laprévotte and M. Le Goff felt very certain that the description of Brotteaux's attitude toward the mob—his mingled disdain, hatred, and fear—was autobiographical; and they may have been right.

There is no place in the socialized state for the dilettante. France may have come to realize this, and the discovery may have been the first source of his skepticism concerning the cause in which he found himself involved.

Of emotion other than sensual and aesthetic emotion (except when he is writing about himself in his volumes of autobiography), there is little evidence in France's work. The socialistic ideal could not stand the test when tried by an intellect which was pure of all mystical dross: it was as absurd as the belief in God or as confidence in human

reason. Did it not offend too the aesthetic sense of this dilettante, who was aristocratic to the core?¹ Could he believe as he did in the aristocracy of brains,² the aristocracy of beauty (in theory, at least), the aristocracy of sensation (except when he descends to Zola's level), and be really sympathetic toward the stupid populace (remember Bissolo's words), the ugliness of poverty and dirt, the vulgarity of vulgar souls? There is no reason why one who is an aristocrat by birth, social position, or wealth should not become an ardent and convinced socialist. But Anatole France was an aristocrat of sensibility, whose interest was not in the vulgar comforts of life but in the rare and curious sensations which were beyond the horizon of the crowd. Is it possible that one who was so aware of the nature of the gulf that separated his elect spirit from the mass of humanity could in real earnest join forces with the equalitarians?

In any case France never gave more than his heart to the socialistic cause; his head retained its skeptical aloofness.

5

I think I have explained the anomaly presented by the case of Anatole France. His head ruled him, except for an occasional temporary abdication, until the time of the Dreyfus Affair. His sensuality, I have said, had nothing to do with his heart: it was merely a matter of sense; he never really loved. After the Affair his heart was intermittently dominant; but the habit established in the long, productive years preceding 1897, during which he had placed his con-

¹ Compare Le Goff, 120-121, 161. In England, for special reasons, which I can not go into here, many of the aesthetes of the Eighties espoused socialism (more or less seriously) in the Nineties.

² See *Pierre Nozière*, 160.

fidence in the intellect, could not be shaken off. Even after 1897 the tone of the *Jardin d'Epicure* emerges again and again, sharper and more hopeless than ever precisely because it appears only at intervals during a period of hopeful socialistic enthusiasm.

It seems to be a fact that the head or the heart will lead man astray if either is accepted as exclusive guide. That harmonious development of human faculties which France would recognize as the Greek ideal, implies a reconciliation of the claims of head and heart, and a recognition of something which is neither of the head nor of the heart (something which Socrates and Marcus Aurelius called the inner voice; or perhaps even something more mysterious still). The intelligence of the mind and the sentiment (or sensuality) of the heart: these France had, albeit inharmonious and discordant and constantly struggling each to undo the other. Those faculties, whatever they are, which create will, and, through will, character, France ignored absolutely. And since he ignored them, he has taught others to ignore them.

Of minor inconsistencies in France's work I have said little or nothing. I have called attention to one major inconsistency, which is not to be found primarily in the momentous shift marked by his transference of paramount allegiance from head to heart at the time of the Dreyfus Affair, for that would be a change of mind, and change of mind is not inconsistency. The significant inconsistency is to be found in the duality of the man since the Affair: he is now an idealist, now a scoffer at idealism. Or ought we give to this oscillation which we call inconsistency the humbler name of weakness? Was France merely like the rest of us ordinary mortals: an enthusiastic believer in the good sense of the mob at one moment, disgusted with proletarian stupidity and the incapacity or treachery of popular leaders the next; recon-

verted to socialism or communism, an apostate a month later, demanding a rifle on August 1, 1914, like any commonplace chauvinist, only to discover his mistake after a few weeks; back again to chauvinism, only to revert to the spirit of one who is above the mêlée—to and fro, swayed by the latest influence that breathed upon him, or by expediency, the many-headed god of bourgeois and Philistines? Inconsistency, weakness—perhaps there is no difference between the two. But inconsistency is a better term when one is talking of as great a man as Anatole France: weakness in us, inconsistency in him. Jaurès was a man of a different stamp; so too was Maurras.

Though he is always swimming with the current, France is always destitute of real conviction, and frequently makes his choice among the conspicuous currents of the day not so much out of love for those who will be his associates, and for their principles, as out of dislike for the principles and personalities of their enemies. The same spirit of contradiction which sometimes induced him to lend his allegiance to a movement made him the *enfant terrible* of every group that accepted him: like the Queen of Carthage, he showed partiality to neither Trojan nor Tyrian, lavishing his irony on friend and foe alike. They all exposed themselves to ridicule, for all groups, like all individuals, are more or less absurd. But all are not equally absurd; and one may well ignore small absurdities if insistence upon them would prove prejudicial to the acceptance of great excellences. France was a hater of systems as well as of groups. Everyone will sympathize with him to a certain extent, for systems are frequently made up of frozen formulas, and groups involve compromise on the part of adherents. And yet one may recognize with France the constant change, the relativity of

all things, and still ask for something like stability in a writer's *central* view of the world and man.¹

France was always an anarchist—not of the conventional type, however. His home was open in his later years to Russian extremists, but he was merely amused by them: they took anarchy much more seriously than he did. When I say he was an anarchist, I am not referring to political anarchy; I am speaking of intellectual and moral anarchy. His continuous attack on all ethical standards is an invitation to moral anarchy; his four volumes of the *Vie littéraire* are pleasing essays in critical anarchy; and intellectual anarchy reigns in the body of his thought. Emotional curiosity in a dilettante blossoms into moral anarchy; the fruit of intellectual curiosity in a dilettante is critical and intellectual anarchy. It must be said, further, in view of the spirit of contradiction that was strong within him, of his frequent shift from one extreme position to the opposite extreme position, of his hatred of pedestals and his iconoclastic inclination, that critics have not unjustifiably commented on his anarchical love of destruction for its own sake. In the speech with which he welcomed Anatole France into the membership of the French Academy, M. Gréard said in reference to France's works: "Has the audacity of destruction ever been accompanied by so much delicacy? Have ruins ever been so gaily accumulated? . . . The gentle master,

¹ France himself used to say, somewhat discrediting, by exaggeration, a principle which is sound if not abused: "When you accept a doctrine, you should accept it even in its last consequences. When you belong to a party, you should be in the advance-guard, at the acting-point, which is the nearest to the future, and which the main body always finally overtakes." Reported by Corday, 124. This explains France's political radicalism, but it does not excuse his infidelity to the cause of radicalism whenever he was distressed by the manners and conduct of his fellow-radicals.

with premeditated unconsciousness, leads the festival of universal nothingness."

Like M. Gréard, D'Annunzio was amused by the intellectual anarchy which reigns in France's work. He sent a copy of one of his dramas (*La Pisanella*, 1913) to France carrying this malicious inscription: "To Anatole France, upon whom all faces of Truth and Error smile alike."¹

We like anarchy to-day—in literature. The reason we like in literature what we abhor in life is that literature is looked upon now as an "escape from life," and as a thing therefore having no connection with our daily existence. We invite authors to say the most outrageous things, and enjoy it all because, literature being divorced from life, we think we have no reason to fear that readers will translate into action what they greet with approval in the pages of a book. In short, we do not treat purveyors of literature seriously. Their sole mission is to amuse us, and if they succeed better in their mission by being a little indecent, or a little anarchical, or a little absurd, what harm can it do? We like to be mildly shocked, and vaguely mystified, and delicately insulted.

"Our fathers," says Joubert, "judged books by standards of taste, conscience, and reason. We judge them by the emotions which they bring us. Will this book help us or hurt us? Is it likely to improve or corrupt the mind? Will it do good or harm? These were the great questions for those who came before us. We ask: Will it amuse us?"²

"Taste in literature," he says further, "is become so domestic, and approbation so dependent on pleasure, that in a book we look first of all for the author, and in the author for his humors and his passions. We ask that the soul of a writer should show itself with

¹ Roujon, 69.

² *Pensées*, 226, ed. Raynal.

the strength and the weakness, the knowledge and the errors, the wisdom and the illusions, which bring a man down to our level, and are such as we like to find in our friends. We ask no longer for a wise guide, but for a lover or friend, or at least an actor, who shows himself off and charms our taste much more than our reason, by his part and by his play. We want books that will keep us in a good humor, not that will make us better; we ask that we should be able to touch and handle those who have written them, that they should have, in fact, flesh and blood. We have scarcely any admiration left for pure mind. . . ."¹

Joubert recognized, however, that in every period of modern times there have been large masses of indiscriminating readers, and he realized that a considerable number of writers would readily and naturally pander to their taste. Great writers, however, he felt, would not be of that number. "There has never been a single age in literature," he continues, "whose prevailing taste was not diseased. The success of the best writers consists in making healthy work agreeable to sick tastes."²

6

Anatole France has been a popular writer, because he has satisfied the ruling tastes of the various periods through which he lived. I do not mean popular, of course, in the sense of appealing to the vast unlettered public; I mean that he has been a favorite among a certain élite of readers. He has always been one of those who swim with the current, as I suggested above. If there is contradiction in his thought and work, *tant pis*: there is contradiction in the thought and work of his day. If, for instance, he condemned naturalism and wrote like a naturalist, he was but following the practise

¹ *Pensées*, 230; translated by Katharine Lyttleton.

² *Ibid.*, 326.

of the aesthetes of the Nineties; if later he was at the same time a socialist and a cynic, he was not alone in his inconsistency.

I have referred to a certain timidity in France's nature, which has been apparent to those who knew him personally. "He is the least pugnacious of men," says Mr. Turquet-Milnes. "Such is the testimony of those who know him best. His enemies would suggest that he is afraid of receiving blows. Those who have had personal contact with him speak too of his modesty. The charm of his modesty has endeared him to all who have enjoyed companionship with the self-effacing scholar, Sylvestre Bonnard, and with that winsome boy who appears in the *Livre de mon Ami* and elsewhere. His modesty is perhaps the ransom of his timidity."

From the picture of Anatole France the man presented by M. Le Goff, we derive a distressing impression, not of timidity, but of something very like cowardice. France was of course very old at the time of the war, but M. Le Goff does not intimate that the master's lack of courage is to be accounted for by his age, and the evidence is abundant from his own statements, and from those of others, that he had always been timid. Furthermore, he is not depicted as senile in the books of reminiscences that have been published. It is well known that his faculties retained their alertness till the end of his life.

Called upon during the war to appear publicly in defense of the principles which in private he championed ardently, implored to come to the aid of associates charged with treason and in danger of death, appealed to as the greatest French man of letters, the only one whose voice would be heard over the whole world, and entreated to speak out against frenzied patriotism and the inhuman war—he prom-

ised and promised, and held his peace. When he did speak, it was to glorify the heroes of the conflict in the conventional way, as in the pronouncements collected in *Sur la Voie glorieuse*.

France's lack of sincerity in the relations of everyday life is disclosed by the revelations of all his biographers. He was in the habit of making a pretense of the greatest personal devotion where he really felt only contempt or indifference.¹ So too as to his expressions of literary opinion, his intimates were on their guard. "You know," he said to Courteline, a close companion of the last years, "that I prize your work." "I beg your pardon, dear *Maître*," answered Courteline with a chuckle; "I know you tell me so, but I don't know what you think."²

A year before his death, he said publicly, referring to his patriotic utterances during the war: "I allowed myself to

¹ He seems never to have had any real friends,—at any rate after his early years,—but to the casual observer he must have appeared to have greatly loved and to have been greatly loved in return. His Boswells are struck by the fact that his friendship was frequently accorded to a person whose attractiveness was difficult to understand; that it was extremely ardent while it lasted, but did not last long.

"Spring brought M. France back to us," says M. Le Goff. "He had with him a young wounded soldier, S., . . . who was for some weeks on intimate terms with him at La Béchellerie. Then he disappeared, like so many others. At that time M. France doted on him. . . . He was a boy of average intelligence, skilled in flattery, which he lavished without stint upon the master, who accepted it without displeasure."

"We saw Wasser again in 1920 for M. France's wedding, and then, like so many others, he disappeared from the screen of La Béchellerie like one acting in a pantomime."

"It would be impossible to exaggerate the attentions which M. France lavished upon Dr. C. and Mme. S. . . . Then during the years which followed the war, they gradually disappeared, like so many others whom I have seen come and go at La Béchellerie."

"Is this the same man whom we saw only a week ago, overwhelmed, groaning, broken with grief [because of the death of his daughter, Suzanne]? Was he sincere, or was he acting a comedy for our benefit?" Le Goff, 98-99, 118, 194-195, 203.

² *Ibid.*, 247.

make little speeches to living and dead soldiers. I regret them now as the worst action of my life.”¹ “I spoke and wrote like my concierge,” he said to M. Le Goff. “I am ashamed of it, but I had to.”² One wonders why he had to, and one thinks of Rolland. During the battle of Verdun, France said privately: “This dishonors the civilized world: the only progress accomplished by humanity serves to destroy it, to complete its ruin. What a disgrace! And nobody says anything!” “*Maître*, Romain Rolland has dared,” someone suggested. “Yes,” answered France (M. Le Goff informs us that he disliked Rolland intensely), “but by his frontal attack he has gathered hatreds together and concentrated them; against him they are terrific. That’s a funny position—above the *mêlée*. Is such a thing possible? Are we not all in the *mêlée*, whether we wish it or not? Never, no matter what one does, can one separate oneself from one’s country. It is better to share its stupidity than to renounce it. . . . Romain Rolland does not know how to do anything but preach. He has the soul of a Protestant pastor in a little German city, living between his Bible and his piano with an ugly, faithful wife.”³ This is what many bourgeois were saying about Rolland at the time, but they said it without the tone of petty spite which is apparent here, for they did not constantly complain: “And nobody says anything!” Their position is entirely comprehensible, but the position above the *mêlée* is comprehensible also. Whether one prefers the bourgeois attitude or that of Rolland, it is perfectly clear that France would have been in Switzerland with Rolland if he had had the courage of his convictions.

¹ Corday, 162.

² Le Goff, 47.

³ *Ibid.*, 84, 96.

I should not have reproduced this disillusioning picture of the great writer if I felt that his conduct was due primarily to the feebleness of age, or if I had any reason to suppose that M. Le Goff was hostile or inexact, or if I did not feel that this intimate view of France makes an important contribution to the understanding of his character and of his work.

France's books constitute a valuable reflection of the successive currents of thought in which he lived. His lack of courage prevented him from developing his talent with that independence and that superiority to environment which we associate with the names of great men. "From time to time," says Goethe, "I come upon a youth in whom I could wish nothing changed or improved; but I am troubled when I see that many young men who are so fully equipped are contented nevertheless merely to swim with the current of their time. Their attention I would call to this, that to man in his fragile craft a rudder has been given expressly that he may follow the guidance of his insight and not the caprice of the waves."

7

One of the penalties which an author pays who allows himself to be controlled by the reigning fashions of his generation is that succeeding generations are likely to find him antiquated. France, who expressed so completely the varying moods of his time, is already, I think, a little out of date. It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine what are the prevailing literary and philosophical tendencies of one's own day, but it is certain that while we are at the present moment in part preserving the spirit of the Nineties, we are in part also reacting vigorously against it. So obscure, to me at least, are the features on the face of things

to-day that I shall not venture to be more precise. The forces of dissolution, vigorous and heedless destructiveness, and contempt for man are all about us; but a constructive struggle, an effort to rebuild a shattered civilization on new bases is clearly evident.

If we are escaping from some of the evils which beset the age in which France lived, unfortunately we are also, apparently, beginning to cast suspicion upon some of its virtues. We seem to be losing its concern for beauty. Aestheticism need not descend to the status of unsatisfying sensuality, and to the cult of a circumscribed and frequently unhealthy beauty. It is not desirable, either, that it be discarded in favor of a drab vulgarity. Erudition may become a sort of superficial and sterile curiosity, as it was in the case of France and many of his contemporaries. But one could almost wish that the reign of the dilettante might return. when one encounters a scorn for every kind of *disinterested* intellectual curiosity, and sees learning prized only if it seems likely to prove of practical value.

Our writers are still at one with France in the delight which they take in shooting their shafts at convention and stupidity. But there are unmistakable signs that the world is getting mortally sick of the endless and futile and very cheap warfare against Puritans and Philistines. Artists are being asked now to pursue nobler game. There is even some evidence that lubricity began to lose its glamor when its ubiquity deprived it of the charm possessed by stolen sweets. It was shorn of its dearest enticements when it was brought down from the highest shelf of the locked secretary to replace the family album on the living-room (formerly, "parlor") table.

France shakes us out of puerile acquiescence in the long-established belief that man is all good, and that there is no

such thing as evil, that everything is for the best in the best of worlds. This questioning of our facilely accepted doctrines concerning the relation of man to God, man to man, man to the universe is salutary. It is a beneficent antidote to sentimentality, though it did not avail to save France himself entirely; and it is an intellectual tonic, one which will be always needed, for it is essential to that skepticism and that disillusion which may well be the beginning of wisdom. Our generation has not yet, however, advanced beyond Anatole France to the point of perceiving that skepticism and disillusion can never be more than the beginning of wisdom; that they can never serve as anything more than the necessary clearing of the way for an advance to bases upon which one may establish reasons for human existence.

The age of nihilism has not passed, but it seems to be passing. Men cannot long endure without some reason for living. That even France saw, for while he exhausted himself to prove the nothingness of things past, present, and future, occasionally he recognized the melancholy truth that man must have something to live by, even if it is nothing but a falsehood. In his youth he said in regard to religion: "What matter if the dream lie, if it is beautiful?"¹ Again and again he praises that ignorance which permits men to believe in the divine or in themselves. "Ignorance is the necessary condition of human happiness," says Brotteaux, speaking for France. ". . . Ignorance creates our tranquillity; lies, our felicity."²

"I love truth," says France, at the end of his last book.³ "I believe that humanity has need of it; but assuredly it needs still more the lie which flatters and consoles, and gives

¹ *Poésies*, 128.

² *Dieux ont Soif*, 73.

³ *Vie en Fleur* (1922), 349.

infinite hope. But for lies, humanity would perish of despair and boredom." He had already said through Dr. Trublet, who impersonated him: "I am a dealer in lies. I relieve; I console. Can one console and relieve without lying?"¹

France sees thus the necessity of lies, or illusions, as they are more properly called.² Man has lived by beliefs or illusions, which are in fact nothing other than the best guesses he has been able to frame as to the why of things: they are the product of reason or of intuition, rational or mystical,³ necessarily uncertain, to be sure, but the best that is left to him after he has given up the beliefs which are the product of ignorance. The last two or three generations have spared no pains to despoil man of his beliefs and of his illusions, and Anatole France, whose faith in illusion was merely superficial, has been a mighty worker in the cause of incred-

¹ *Histoire comique*, 171.

² For France's praise of illusion see the passage quoted above, p. 53, from the *Opinions de Jérôme Coignard*: "They were beneficent . . . , the one . . . , the other in creating illusions from which there is no awakening;" and the one quoted above, p. 58, from the *Ile des Pingouins*, 403-404: "They had illusions. . . ;" and the following: "What difference does it make after all what man believes, provided he believes; what difference what he hopes, provided he hopes." *Vie littéraire*, III, 72. "The sentiments which render life sweet, or at least endurable, spring from a lie and are nourished by illusions." *Jardin d'Epicure*, 33. "Let us have zeal of heart and the necessary illusions." *Ibid.*, 131. "Only in illusion is there joy." *Puits de Sainte-Claire*, 157. "I want to be amused and I believe that there is no happiness without illusion." *Vie littéraire*, I, 123.

³ France himself sounds occasionally what seems like the mystical note, but is probably nothing more than the Romantic yearning for the land of the blue flower; for instance: "The charm which touches the soul of man most nearly is the charm of mystery. There is no beauty without veils, and it is ever the unknown that we prefer. Existence would be intolerable if we never dreamed. The best thing in life is the idea it gives us of a something that is not in it. The real enables us to create, more or less clumsily, a bit of ideal. That is perhaps its greatest utility." *Jardin d'Epicure*, 145. Compare the passage quoted below, p. 218, note.

lity and despondency.¹ The present age is still prevailingly one of unbelief, and is impatient of illusions. But indications are not lacking that we are tending toward a new anchorage in illusion or in belief. When that goal is reached, Anatole France will indeed seem somewhat antiquated.

8

I shall appear to some readers to have eluded consideration of France's tenderness and pity, qualities which are considered paramount in his work by many critics. It is in fact by an appeal to these two qualities that a bridge is frequently thrown over the gap between the dilettante-skeptic of before 1897 and the humanitarian-socialist of the twenty-five years following.² I have not entirely ignored the link thus suggested, however, since I have alluded frequently to his sentiment, which has, to be sure, seemed to me so prevailingly soft that I have been impelled to speak of it as sentimentality rather than as sentiment.

I have already quoted a familiar passage in which France says that from the time in his childhood when he became conscious of the nothingness of all, he was inclined to sadness, gentleness, and pity. His sadness, gentleness, and pity are associated in his own mind with a "tender contempt" for his fellow men. The Abbé Coignard "easily endured insults, aided thereto as much by his Christian spirit as by philosophy. But what aided him most was a great contempt for men, himself not excepted."³ He "despised men

¹ See on p. 65 the passage from the *Jardin d'Épicure*, 66-67.

² France told M. Ségur (p. 188; compare p. 134) that it was pity that made him a socialist. He explained the development differently to M. Brousson (p. 335): "Why am I entering the camp of the socialists? It's better to be carried than dragged along. (*Il vaut mieux être porté qu'emporté.*)"

³ *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque*, 217.

tenderly.”¹ “I have no illusions,” he said, “in regard to men, and in order not to hate them I despise them. Mr. Rockstrong, I despise them tenderly. But they are not grateful to me. They want to be hated. You anger them when you show them the sweetest, the most indulgent, the most charitable, the most gracious, the most human of the sentiments that they may inspire: contempt. However, mutual contempt means peace on earth, and if men despised one another sincerely, they would no longer do one another harm and they would live in amiable tranquillity.”²

Anatole France has a habit of repeating himself. On several occasions he says something like this: “The more I think of human life the more I believe that we ought to give it as witnesses and judges Irony and Pity. . . . Irony and Pity are two good counsellors; the one by her smile renders life amiable; the other by her tears renders it sacred. The irony I invoke is not cruel. It does not mock love or beauty. It is gentle and benevolent. Its laughter quiets wrath, and it teaches us to make sport of the wicked and the stupid, whom otherwise we might have the weakness to hate.”³

I am doubtless not the first to be perplexed by this mingling of tenderness with the most charitable, the most gracious, the most human of the sentiments that man may inspire: contempt; nor the first to demur to this alliance of two good counsellors, pity and irony, which work together to render life sacred and to teach us to ridicule those of our fellow men whom we might otherwise hate. Why there is no other alternative to hatred than ridicule, and why wickedness and stupidity should rouse the same kind of antipathy, it is difficult to see.

France has said so many times that pity is one of his good

¹ *Opinions de Jérôme Coignard*, 19.

² *Ibid.*, 209-210.

³ *Jardin d'Epicure*, 122.

counsellors that we must believe him. But his works are evidence that he did not prove a good listener. Pascal distinguishes between the pity which springs from "sympathy and tenderness" and the pity which springs from contempt. France has not made this distinction. The difference is important, however; it determines the tone of a satirist's work in a most significant manner, as is apparent from a moment's reflection as to the general impression carried away from the reading of a dozen volumes of France compared with that which remains with one after a day or two in the company of such a satirist as Molière. The pity of Molière springs from "sympathy and tenderness," only occasionally from contempt. In Anatole France there is an abundance of the contempt which is untouched by pity; there is a certain quantity of the pity which proceeds from contempt; there is very little of the pity which proceeds from "sympathy and tenderness."

Tolerance is sometimes mistaken for pity; it may however be merely a form of unmitigated contempt. In its noblest aspect it is based upon respect for men and their opinions. France, I think I may safely say, rarely or never respected any opinions other than his own. Whatever one may think of the tone he adopted in the polemic with Brunetière, and whatever one may think of the merits of the case, it is certain that France did not treat Brunetière's opinions with respect. He was suave in his treatment of Brunetière, the man, but the suavity appears to be nothing other than the cloak which screens contempt. He removed the cloak much later (1912) and at a dinner of the Friends of Montaigne discloses frankly the attitude which was surely his at the time he wrote the prefaces to the *Vie littéraire*. "There was once," he said, "in the kingdom of scholasticism, a little babbling, disputatious man, of hard substance and

astrigent forms, as cutting as a paper knife. Atheist and fanatic, he had perused Montaigne.”¹

How France treated the literary opinions of Zola and Ohnet is well known. His essay on the latter² he entitles “Outside of Literature.” In it he reaches the highest summit to which contempt may carry. After the Affair he empties the vials of his scorn upon those who are his enemies and Zola’s.

France’s tolerance is not a mark of respect for the opinions of those who disagree with him. For such opinions he has only contempt, which is unqualified, if they are significant enough to rouse that sentiment; or indifference, in case they are not worth bothering about. The four volumes of the *Vie littéraire* contain much commendation of friends and their opinions and some contempt for enemies and their opinions; but they are in part also the issue of the author’s indifference. That pleasant breath of urbanity and gentleness and tenderness which so many charmed readers find in these volumes, is to some extent the product of amused and egotistical indifference.

The tolerance which springs from “sympathy and tenderness” must be distinguished from that which has its source in indifference or contempt. The latter is the type generally encountered in the works of Anatole France. The finest type of tolerance, that which proceeds from respect for opinions which are not one’s own and for men who hold such opinions, is almost unknown to him. It may be added that the really tolerant man is not likely to have the word contempt very frequently on his lips. To speak constantly of the contempt in which one holds mankind is an indication that one is in the habit of comparing oneself with

¹ Quoted by Giraud, 207.

² *Vie littéraire*, II, 56 ff.

one's inferiors, for everybody can find some one inferior to himself. But it is true too that everybody can find not one but many men (if not among the living, then among the dead) superior to himself. It is important to discover whether a man instinctively compares himself with those beneath him or with those above him. One who habitually looks up rather than down when estimating his own value will probably prove to be truly tolerant, and contempt is a word which he will use only sparingly.

Readiness to condone human frailties may, like an inclination to tolerance, be in reality nearer to contempt, or to indifference, than to pity. Here again a distinction must be made between the weaknesses which France approved, and those to which he was indifferent, and those which he disapproved. France treats the weaknesses of Coignard with sympathy, tenderness—and approval. When he condones such moral obliquity as that of the *Lys rouge*, he is moved not by sympathy or tenderness, not by any sort of pity for the offenders, but by contempt for social conventions. So indifferent is he to all in the lives of Dechartre and Thérèse other than sensuality that he produces an impression of monstrous coldness toward the fate of these creatures of his brain. He relates their wretched love affairs with no sign of pity for their frenzied sensuality. Even Flaubert seems to have had more pity for Emma Bovary than did France for Thérèse and Dechartre. France's indifference is more devastating than Flaubert's impersonality. Sensuality always roused France to sympathy, but the *Lys rouge* is, as I have said, rather a novel of jealousy than of sensuality. And jealousy was to France so absurd an emotion as to merit not even hatred, but only indifference.

One of the characteristic qualities of the dilettante is indifference. France is like his Nicias, who, "passing by the

square to return to his home, had seen without much surprise (for nothing astonished him) the smoking pyre, Thaïs clad in drugget, and Paphnuce stoned.”¹ France approved Thaïs, and hated and despised Paphnuce. So effective, however, is his indifference, that he comes to look upon the amazing transformation which has befallen both “without much surprise.” His indifference is the indifference of the superior soul who surveys the spectacle of human life from the height of his ivory tower. It is nourished by contempt, not pity, sympathy, or tenderness.

And his irony, which, he says, is not cruel but acts as a substitute for hate—this too has been considered a product of pity and tender contempt. I confess that as I read his books from *Jocaste* to the *Révolte des Anges* I become convinced that I have rarely been in contact with a more pitiless ironist. The pitilessness is attended by all the graces at the command of a literary master. It is not for that reason any the less complete. His irony seems again to bear the stamp of the disdainful superior soul: in it there is contempt, not pity or sympathy or tenderness. And he certainly is far from the truth when he asserts that “it does not mock love and beauty.”

9

I have been seeking to reach the center of France's mind as it is disclosed by the general tenor of his work. I recognize that he is not entirely destitute of pity, and sympathy, and tender contempt, and gentle irony. The emphasis, however, has, I think, been most decidedly misplaced by critics; he is, in his main tendency, unsympathetically contemptuous or indifferent.

¹ *Thaïs*, 235.

I have already said that there are some human beings whom he treats tenderly. First of all, himself. I am going to try to show later that the legend—if legend it is—of his sympathy and pity had its source in *Sylvestre Bonnard* and in the other autobiographical works; that in them there are really gentle irony and the pity which springs from sympathy, as well as the pity which springs from a tender contempt. With the same emotions does France look upon, and write about, those personages who are in fact avatars of himself though not explicitly avowed as such: Nicias, Bergeret, Brotteaux. There is another group of individuals whom he treats gently. They are those who are not capable of caring for themselves: the weak, the humble, and especially the *simples*. For all of these he has sympathy, pity, and a contempt which may be defined as tender. They are numerous, but they are all insignificant personages, mere supernumeraries: Telemachus, the Jongleur of Notre-Dame, the negro slave in *Thaïs*, Choulette, Gestas, Pied d'Alouette, Crainquebille, the Bergerets' serving girl, Athénaïs, Riquet. All these disarm antagonism by their weakness. The père Longuemare is handled gently, sympathetically, even lovingly because, though he is a priest, he is at the same time simple, almost weak-minded.

It has been said that the victims of France's malice are the wicked or the stupid; that he pitied all others. This does not mean much. He does not treat the stupid maliciously if they are stupid enough to be simple-minded. And as for the wicked, only those human beings are wicked who are different from him, or hold views hostile to his. When representative men and women of the world, those who are adult and normally intelligent or unintelligent, appear in his works, as in the *Lys rouge*, the *Histoire contemporaine*, the *Histoire comique*, they are treated with contempt if they

differ from the author in nature, or with indifference if they are beneath contempt. If they are set up as *advocati diaboli*, men of straw made to maintain views which are not France's own, they are knocked down without mercy. Such are Paphnuce, who dared try to observe that chastity which France hated; Gamelin, whose temerity was so great that he held to Rousseau's belief in virtue; and even the poor librarian in the *Révolte des Anges*, whose partial imbecility was not sufficient to redeem his pedantry and his prudishness.

A place apart must be allotted to France's sympathetic pity for the downtrodden who were unfortunate rather than weak. This emotion already appears as a minor note in the *Opinions de Jérôme Coignard*.¹ It comes to the front after 1897. But his skeptical head and his sentimental heart were at war. Skepticism again brought disillusion to this sentimentalist, who had been disillusioned so many times before. Pity for the downtrodden he continued to feel at times. The proof of this fact is to be found in the speeches he delivered at meetings of the proletariat. But, though he was theoretically tenderly concerned about the downtrodden, he despised them in fact, and not tenderly; and he had at bottom nothing but scorn for their leaders, their doctrines, and their illusions. The remarks of his mouthpiece Bissolo prove this; so too does most of the *literary* work of his last twenty-five years.

That strange hybrid "tender contempt" seems to symbolize the warfare in the man to which I have so frequently called attention: he was compounded of a sentimental heart and a skeptical head. Guided now by one, now by the

¹ His real attitude to the wretched at this time seems to have been expressed in the following sentence: "Being poor, they hated riches and had an instinctive taste for destruction." *Thaïs*, 221.

other, he was now tender, now contemptuous. But unaware of the fact that he had not, like the great humanists, harmonized the claims of the two, that they did not operate in him simultaneously but successively, he coined that emblem of disharmony, "tender contempt," without realizing that it was an inhuman monster and a confession of defeat.

"Contempt," says Meredith, "is a sentiment that cannot be entertained by comic intelligence. What is it but an excuse to be idly minded, or personally lofty, or comfortably narrow, not perfectly humane?"

The Aphorist in *Richard Feverel* was a humanist, incomplete and defective, but capable of learning. He learned one lesson which he was not ashamed to set down. He phrases his conclusion as follows:

"Who is the coward among us?—He who sneers at the failings of Humanity!"

10

To the tenderness which may spring from contempt, I am unable to attach much value; and I am inclined to follow Pascal in distinguishing between the pity which proceeds from "sympathy and tenderness" and the pity which proceeds from contempt. I find in Anatole France an abundance of the contempt which springs from indifference, and of the contempt which springs from hatred. But I know that sadness and pity, tenderness and gentle irony were not always alien to him, for I find them in the *Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*.

If Anatole France had not written this little volume, if he had not been himself (at times) Sylvestre Bonnard, the love he has inspired among readers of books would have been sadly diminished. Here indeed is the France of the world's devotion; here is the gentle ironist; here is the tender

critic of human frailty (not stupidity or wickedness) who spreads the gospel of tender tolerance (not contempt) and banishes hatred. This is indeed the work of one who has listened well to two good counsellors: Pity and Irony. Here is all the exquisiteness of delicate art; here is a mellow and kindly skepticism; here is no enervating sensuality; here is no mordant, obtrusive sarcasm; here is the humanity of a not completely disillusioned Anatole France, the Anatole France that might have endured, had he not, like his Bergeret, forsaken Virgil for Petronius.

Sylvestre Bonnard seems to me to be the source of what I have called the legend of France's tender pity and gentle irony. Something of the same good-humor, sympathy, and indulgent irony is in the *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque*. These, I think, are France's masterpieces, not perfect, to be sure, but such as will long retain a place in the affections of lovers of literature. And I feel that they will gain when some of his other works have been forgotten. *Thaïs* and the *Dieux ont Soif* possess undeniable marks of power, but they are marred, perhaps irretrievably, by a contemptuous bitterness and a personal spleen. In these, which are in the second rank among France's work, and still more in some of the rest of the novels, there is a noticeable lack of that tender pity and that gentle irony which delight the reader of his two masterpieces, and are not, as has generally been maintained, dominant qualities in all his work.

Sylvestre Bonnard and the *Rôtisserie* came relatively early in France's career. Their tender pity and gentle irony were read into the succeeding volumes. One other fact, I think, contributed to the establishment of the legend. France happened one day, while his heart was dictating, to write those beautiful sentences I have quoted above: "The

more I think of human life, the more I believe we ought to give it as witnesses and judges Irony and Pity. . . ." As happened to him frequently when he had written lovely phrases, he was intoxicated by the charm of these, and he used them again and again. He repeated them so often that the world began to accept them as an expression of a lasting, not a momentary mood; and this conviction was reënforced by the subtle enchantment of their magic cadences.

Thus, unless I am mistaken, was established and confirmed a legend which has ever since led critics to speak of France's tender pity, gentle irony, and benevolent contempt, even while they are discussing *Thaïs*, the *Ile des Pingouins*, and the *Dieux ont Soif*. And strangely enough, they praise at the same time his tenderness, and sympathy, and pity on the one hand, and, on the other, his contempt for mankind, and his disillusion, and his skepticism, even after each of these has been pushed to cynicism.

The fine sentences to which I have just referred have come to be looked upon as the natural epigraph for France's work. They apply to only a part of it, the best, but small in extent; they would better perhaps be replaced by this from George Moore: "Pity, that most vile of all virtues, has never been known to me. The great pagan world I love knew it not."¹ The aesthetic and sensuous elements in Christianity appealed to France more strongly than they did to Moore, and he imagined his paganism more touched than it really was by the Christian praise of pity and sorrow.

¹ Moore was not so inhuman as he loved (and loves still) to paint himself. In his preface to *Esther Waters* (edition of 1899) he renounces the homage of bourgeois *miratio* (see above, p. 117, note) and writes: "That all things that live are to be pitied is the lesson I learn from reading my book, and that others may learn as much is my hope."

We have difficulty in following France when he talks of pity. It is only with a considerable effort that we seize some portion of his meaning when he speaks of pity as associated with sensuality. Of a young workman one of his characters says: "He is not human because he is not sensual." "Ah! One must be sensual to be human?" he is asked. "Certainly, madame. Pity is in the vitals as tenderness is on the skin."¹

I have spoken of France's cult of sorrow, which seemed to be primarily an expression of the aesthetic and sensual element in his nature, only secondarily and vaguely altruistic. "Happy those who suffer and woe to the happy! For having uttered that cry the Gospel has reigned for two thousand years upon the earth." This opinion he pronounced in his dilettante days. As a socialist (and an anti-clerical) he forgot the element of pleasant voluptuousness which he found in the Christian doctrine of suffering and saw the cult of sorrow as a fraudulent invention of priests and capitalists:

"A long religious tradition," he says, "which weighs upon us, teaches us that privation, suffering, and grief are good and desirable. . . . What an imposture. It is by telling the people that they must suffer in this world to be happy in the next that a pitiful submission to all oppressions and all iniquities has been secured. Let us not heed the priests who teach that suffering is excellent. It is joy that is good!"²

He seems to have recoiled from the presence of suffering. M. Ségur³ says: "Because of the strong impression it

¹ *Lys rouge*, 63.

² *Vers les Temps meilleurs*, I, 20-21; compare *Révolte des Anges*, 222.

³ P. 134; compare the amusing pages of Mr. Brousson, 171-174. Anatole France's reluctance to having a sick man in his house reminds one of Rous-

produced upon him, the sight of illness or of suffering was unendurable to him. Knowing that he could not resist it, he kept away from it." M. Ségur ascribes the master's reluctance to contemplate the misery of others to pity. The real explanation would probably involve a more egoistic emotion than pity. True pity endures the sight of wretchedness. Viewed in its most favorable light, France's attitude to suffering seems to have been something like that expressed by Renan:

"Sorrow is certainly an odious, humiliating thing, harmful to the noble functions of life. Man can combat it, almost eliminate it, always escape from it;" and:

"Nature wants the greatest sum of life with the least suffering possible." ⁷³

It is true that at the end of his life, in anti-socialistic moments of his socialistic days, the voluptuary still believes in sorrow sometimes, for though he resents its association with Christian dogma, he cannot forget entirely its sensual connection with joy: "We love life, life full of woe, because we love suffering. And why should we not love it? It resembles joy and at times is confounded with joy." ² Formerly he loved suffering for the sensual element in it, and hated it for its own sake and because that religion which made a cult of it was hostile to other forms of voluptuousness. Now he loves it and hates it still for the same reasons; and hates it for an additional reason—because the Church is the enemy of socialism.

seau's desertion of his friend Lemaitre, who lay before him in an epileptic fit. Pity was as important a human virtue, in theory, to Rousseau as to Anatole France.

¹ *Feuilles détachées*, 385, 380.

² *Vie en Fleur*, 341.

Was France led to hatred of the Church by his love of socialism; or did he not rather come to love socialism because he hated the Church, and socialism was the enemy of the Church?

He had loved religion for the beauty and sensuous appeal of its service, and for its cult of pity and sorrow. But already in his earliest days he had begun to distrust its praise of suffering, and to recognize in its prohibitions an irksome obstacle to individual freedom. I have quoted the rebuke which he addressed in one of his first volumes to the "God of sorrows whom human suffering pleases."¹ This rebuke, it should be noted, is addressed, not to the Church, but to Christianity as a religion. I cannot accept the frequently-repeated assertion that France always rigorously separated religion and the Church, viewing the former with tenderness and reserving his hostility for the latter.

Little by little his resentment of ecclesiastical prescription strengthened. It was already vehement at the time when he wrote *Thaïs*. But there is a passage in the *Orme du Mail* (1897) in which critics have detected a strangely autobiographic ring, and which marks the culmination of the change which had been taking place gradually in France's mind. I have already referred to this passage. Firmin Piedagnel was destined to the priesthood. He was attracted to religion by those same elements which appealed to Chateaubriand, Barrès, and Anatole France. The decisive moment was reached: "Suddenly a sentiment was born in him, grew apace, and sustained and fortified him—hatred of priests, a hatred imperishable and fecund, a hatred which was destined to fill his entire life."²

¹ *Poésies*, 157.

² *Orme du Mail*, 27. The supposition that the experience here described

Anatole France writes with that compressed intensity only when he is writing about himself. But the sentiment here described was not "suddenly born in him." It had been gathering strength gradually, and he *suddenly* became conscious of it: the crisis had come.

From 1897 on, his antagonism to religion as religion does not abate, but it is subordinated to the increasing bitterness with which he set himself against the Church. Despite its aesthetic charm, the Church with its authoritarianism, its uncompromising opposition to freedom of thought, its curb on instinct, its insistence upon restraint, was no longer an object of aversion or of "tender contempt," but of hatred—and France joined the Dreyfusards. He, who had never been serious in his life, abandoned his ease, his tolerant and amused contemplation of all things good, bad, just, unjust, clement, cruel, for the sake of a Jewish captain who was not *sympathique*, and of a Republic for which he had no respect.

The Dreyfus Affair was a revelation to Anatole France as to many other Frenchmen. It disclosed the fact that the Church was primarily, for the time at least, not a religious organization, but a militant political force.

It is probable that, but for the Affair, France would have continued to be merely the subtle enemy of religion who wrote *Thaïs* and created Coignard. The conciliatory policy of Leo XIII had brought about in 1893–1894 a lull in the war which Ultramontanes had waged against the Republic since 1871. In 1895, however, French Catholic extremists again renewed the struggle, and soon the most critical moment in the history of France since the fall of the Commune had arrived.

was autobiographical is strengthened by a statement of M. Corday (p. 180), who has had access to the work left unfinished by France: "Anatole France seems to have intended to take up again and develop this character, to write the story of this tender, delicate Piedagnel, who resembled him in certain respects."

The issue was soon extended far beyond the question of the rehabilitation of a disgraced captain. The country was divided into two bitterly hostile camps, each acting in good faith but blinded by passion. Many Frenchmen were convinced that the Church had set forth to reëstablish its dominion in secular as well as religious matters. It seemed determined to transform the political complexion of the country and to crush, not only Jews like Dreyfus and pagans and skeptics like Anatole France, but the Republic and all its institutions as well.

Hatred of priests would never have filled the entire life of Piedagnel-France if the Church had not thus suddenly seemed a direct menace to a vast number of citizens who cherished the privilege of living according to their own individual lights. France knew how to hate priests before the Dreyfus Affair, as the creation of Paphnuce shows. After 1897 his hatred is more conscious, more reasoned. He is tender to Longuemare, the priest of the *Dieux ont Soif*, because he is simple-minded; he respects Lantaigne, the erudite ecclesiastic of the *Anneau d'Améthyste*, who was buried in theological studies. Neither is useful to the Church militant; neither is dangerous to the Church's enemies. Guitrel, the rival of Lantaigne, is an intriguer, one of those priests who were making the Church a formidable political power. France hated him even more than he had hated Paphnuce, for the crime of Paphnuce was merely that he impersonated the Church's ideal of chastity, whereas Guitrel represented the menace of an ecclesiastical control of all human activities.

Personal influences were rousing France to action.¹ How

¹ For the probable influence of Madame de Caillavet in connection with France's determination to support the Dreyfusards, see above, p. 26.

powerful these were can hardly be known accurately. In any case, no Frenchman of note, however loath he might be to become implicated in vexatious disputes, could avoid a struggle in which the whole nation was passionately involved. Under these circumstances the revelation of the Church as an aggressive political machine was sufficient to transform France's growing resentment of its prescriptions into hatred and to awaken in the indolent hedonist and the nonchalant free-thinker the determination to forsake the comforts of seclusion and throw himself into the furious storm of political and religious controversy.

I have analyzed France's temperament in a way that will not prove pleasing to some readers. I have the feeling, however, that a great many have viewed with skepticism the general acceptance of tenderness, sympathy, and pity rather than malice, contempt, and hatred as primary characteristics of the author of *Thaïs*, the *Lys rouge*, the *Histoire contemporaine*, the *Ile des Pingouins*, the *Révolte des Anges*, and the *Dieux ont Soif*.

Immediately after *Sylvestre Bonnard* and the *Rôtisserie*, what seems to be the degeneration of a great literary artist began and continued unabated, except for occasional returns to the mood of the old scholar and of the little boy who is the scholar as he was in his childhood. There is gentle pity in the cycle of the Abbé Coignard, and the irony is delicate and refined, only occasionally cruel; pity for a class is more evident in the Bergeret cycle, but scorn of mankind as a whole is more intense and the irony more biting; in the third group, that of the *Ile des Pingouins*, the *Dieux ont Soif*, and the *Révolte des Anges*, pity for a selected portion of mankind even is absent. The pity of the *Rôtisserie*, which had become scorn in the *Histoire contemporaine*, deepened into positive hatred in the last novels; and the comparatively

mild irony of the Coignard cycle evolved into withering sarcasm. "I declare," said Uncle Toby, "my heart would not let me curse the devil himself with so much bitterness."

The great France is the creator of Sylvestre Bonnard and of the Abbé Coignard. He may well be esteemed as the author of the *Jardin d'Epicure*, the *Lys rouge*, the *Vie littéraire*, some tales, and the first two volumes of the *Histoire contemporaine*. Thenceforth his significance in the literary world diminishes rapidly. His literary activity after the publication of the two volumes last named has to my mind done injury to his fame. There is a dramatic quality in the *Dieux ont Soif* which may be justly admired, but the *Ile des Pingouins* and the *Révolte des Anges* would, I think, have passed almost unnoticed if the name of the author of the *Rôtisserie* and of the *Lys rouge* had not appeared on the title-page. The last two volumes of the *Histoire contemporaine* are inferior to the first; the *Histoire comique* (1903), the *Ile des Pingouins* (1908), the *Contes de Jacques Tournebroke* (1909), and the *Révolte des Anges* (1914) are mere repetitions of what has been much better done before. Indeed one might almost suspect that these works were caricatures put forth by shrewd enemies to show all the vice that lurks in Francianism. The master's irony has become tired and limping; his satire has degenerated into vituperation; his cult of the beautiful, that rare enticement of his earlier years, is dead; his sensuality—is anything more unsavory than ribaldry issuing from the lips of an old man?—has become licentiousness.

The degeneration thus outlined is marked by the deepening into hatred of that indifference or contempt which France felt for opinions which were hostile to his own. This development began about 1890. It seems to have been

gradual and imperceptible, to himself as well as to his readers.

There is a sentence in one of his essays which expresses an idea that strikes me as strangely twisted: "If it is true that you rarely find love without hatred, it is true also that *you rarely see hatred without pity.*"¹ I cannot understand a mingling of hatred and pity for the same object. I can understand hatred for one object arousing love or pity for another. Of M. de Lessay France said: "His love for the king was nothing in comparison with his hatred for the emperor."² I think it cannot be denied that hatred of the Church was in part, perhaps in large part, responsible for the pity and love which France conceived for the proletariat. Thus may hatred for one object rouse love or pity for another. I can understand also love for one object arousing hatred for another. France's love for his own way of life may well have prompted, to a very considerable extent, his increasing hostility to the institution which condemned such an existence.

Fundamentally a voluptuary and a dilettante in constant pursuit of emotional and intellectual stimulation, with desire ever his guide, France came finally to find hateful all those restraints which had earlier awakened in him only indifference or contempt. Human illusions and human conventions amused him at first or quickened him to supercilious scorn. Later, when they stood more clearly in his way, he rose to crush them and wrote the *Ile des Pingouins* and the *Révolte des Anges*. Always an anarchist in his attitude to law and custom, he expressed himself first gently, then fiercely. In the *Ile des Pingouins* he demolishes all human

¹ *Vie littéraire*, II, 6. The italics are mine.

² *Sylvestre Bonnard*, 157.

hopes. In the *Révolte des Anges* he derides decency and glorifies anarchy, and then adds a note to prove that even anarchy is a futile and deceptive gospel. The venom of the *Dieux ont Soif* issues from a sense of individual wrong. The book is the expression of personal hatred for those forces which would impose virtue upon the world. One of those forces was convention; another was Rousseau; a third was the Church.

13

Oscar Wilde is right when he places over against the dictum, "Art imitates Life," the converse truth, "Life mimics Art."¹ Every man who publishes a volume of fiction is giving to the world his interpretation of human actions; and that interpretation is sure to affect the conduct of some at least among his readers. If the way we think and act is influenced by art, then that influence, it seems clear, should be beneficent, unless we are ready to accept an art which makes for the destruction of civilization. Our civilization is certainly very imperfect, but it has at least this defense: it might be worse. And it is probably susceptible of improvement if we go about the task patiently and with some degree of confidence.

Anatole France influenced the age in which he lived; and men still listen respectfully to his voice—for good or for evil. Throughout the preceding pages I have expressed the doubt that he can prove a lasting joy to readers and a beneficent force in the world. The first reason for my doubt is that his work tends to destroy man's belief in himself and in his efforts to improve the conditions of his life. If we are to

¹ He says also, to be sure, "Art has no influence upon action." The mind of a dilettante can turn and turn, and yet go on, and turn again.

escape decadence and destruction, we must, I think, find some ground for belief in our powers, undeterred by recognition of the fact that that belief will inevitably be based, in part at least, on illusion.

I have suggested more or less indirectly a second reason for questioning the value of France to a distraught world. It is his lack of seriousness, a deficiency which is likely to prove fatal to an artist. For if life is a serious game, no writer can long be ranked among the great masters who looks upon himself as a child among other children playing at sand castles by the sea.

It is a dangerous pastime in which Anatole France invites us to join with him, the playing with the senses and toying with the intelligence. Even the frivolous, determined to bend their lives to the call of their caprices and of their uncontrolled desires, will seek to avoid France's way, which leads to futile disillusion, disgust, and despair. And the serious will taste suspiciously of the fruits offered by an enticing sorcerer who prefers subtlety to profundity and sanity; cultivates sensuality without real passion; and prizes delicacy unbalanced by virility, and intellectual curiosity pursued for its own sake, without aim, without purpose.

PART II—THE ARTIST

FRANCE'S CLASSICISM

The fairy Irony to Renan:

"I bring thee a charming gift; but I bring it thee in such abundance that it will encroach upon the domain of all thine other gifts, and warp them. Thou wilt be loved, but no one will ever dare to tell thee his love, for people will always fear to seem fools in thine eyes. Thou wilt make sport of men, of the universe, and of God; thou wilt make sport of thyself, and in the end thou wilt lose all concern for the truth, all taste for it. Thou wilt mingle irony with the gravest thoughts, with the most natural actions, and the best; and irony will render all that thou dost write infinitely seductive, but unsubstantial and fragile."—Jules Lemaître.

CHAPTER I

THE STYLIST

1

THE veneration of Anatole France for the classics of Greece and Rome and France, for the classical in literature and art wherever and whenever it appears, is well known to all readers of his works and of the criticism which they have called forth. That this devotion was not merely perfunctory seems convincingly evident from his style. He spent his years of apprenticeship in study of the old masters and in consciously fashioning for himself a style modelled on theirs and reminiscent of them.¹ Of all contemporary styles, his is generally declared to be the most markedly classic.

In speaking of Maupassant, he set down the "three great qualities of the French writer" as "first, lucidity; second, lucidity; and third, lucidity."² He denounced the natural-

¹ France frequently refers to his classical predelections: "In literary matters I showed myself obstinate; and I have remained a 'classicist.'" *Livre de mon Ami*, 152.

My study of France the thinker has had at its center a comparison of his humanism with that which is thought to have prevailed in ancient times. In considering his art I shall make frequent reference to the ideals and to the achievements of the pagan world. If the reader wonders why Greek humanism and Greek art are in a certain sense held up as the touchstone by which the work of a contemporary writer is tested, it will be sufficient to remind him that the outstanding merit of Anatole France has been generally said to reside in the classicism of his art and in his revival of the ancient humanistic tradition.

² *Vie littéraire*, I, 54.

ists because they ignored "moderation, which is the whole secret of art."³ Lucidity and moderation: these cardinal classic virtues appear, at first glance, to be distinctive characteristics of France's style.

He has certainly something of the aristocratic elegance and smoothness of Virgil, and a great deal of Horace's *curiosa felicitas*, combined with his graceful simplicity (*simplex munditiis*). In fact, though Virgil has not been equalled in respect of those qualities which he so made his own that they have been ever since designated as Virgilian, France, whose temperament recalls that of Horace, challenges comparison with the author of the *Odes* by the "rare felicity" of his style, and by his "simplicity adorned with grace."

These and other excellencies of a purely literary nature, borrowed by the Latins from the mother of the arts, were achieved by the Greeks through their cultivation of an attitude of mind favorable to them: the precision, the harmony, the strength which characterize their literature are the artistic complements of that serenity and sense of proportion which were the guiding principles they set before themselves in all their relations. The Olympian serenity of the Greeks has its modern counterpart, or counterfeit, in the imperturbable detachment of Anatole France, his placid superiority to men and things.

2

Perhaps the greatest of the classic virtues is simplicity. This quality is generally credited to France. I have some doubt as to the justice of this ascription, and hope to be able to show that other qualities, not simplicity, have fascinated his readers.

¹ *Vie littéraire*, II, 195.

Greek rhetoricians from Aristotle to Longinus pointed out the pitfalls of the stylist, and warned writers particularly against the danger of those enemies of simplicity the very names of which fill one with horror: turgidity, bombast, bathos, frigidity, declamation. Anatole France escapes these unscathed; in fact, he seems even unaware of the existence of such dangers. The opening lines of almost any one of his books might be offered in evidence. *Thaïs* begins as follows:

“En ce temps-là le désert était peuplé d’anachorètes. Sur les deux rives du Nil, d’innombrables cabanes, bâties de branchages et d’argile par la main des solitaires, étaient semées à quelque distance les unes des autres, de façon que ceux qui les habitaient pouvaient vivre isolés et pourtant s’entraider au besoin. Des églises, surmontées du signe de la croix, s’élevaient de loin en loin au dessus des cabanes, et les moines s’y rendaient dans les jours de fête, pour assister à la célébration des mystères et participer aux sacrements. Il y avait aussi tout au bord du fleuve, des maisons où les cénobites, renfermés chacun dans une étroite cellule, ne se réunissaient qu’afin de mieux goûter la solitude.”

Here truly is a style which seems successfully to avoid all the enemies of simplicity. Anybody, one is tempted to think, could write such a passage;—and there is a great deal of truth in Pascal’s statement that “the best books are those which every reader thinks he himself could have written.”

But the great virtue of this passage is not simplicity. Let me quote another extract from *Thaïs*, one in which the qualities that have brought pleasure to the reader in the former will be recognized because they are here more conspicuous:

“Au matin, il vit des ibis immobiles sur une patte, au bord de l’eau, qui reflétait leur cou pâle et rose. Les saules étendaient au loin sur la berge leur doux feuillage gris; des grues volaient en triangle dans le ciel clair et l’on entendait parmi les roseaux le

cri des hérons invisibles. Le fleuve roulait à perte de vue ses larges eaux vertes où des voiles glissaient comme des ailes d'oiseau, où, ça et là, au bord, se mirait une maison blanche, et sur lesquelles flottaient au loin des vapeurs légères, tandis que des îles lourdes de palmes, de fleurs et de fruits, laissaient s'échapper de leurs ombres des nuées bruyantes de canards, d'oies, de flamants et de sarcelles. A gauche, la grasse vallée étendait jusqu'au désert ses champs et ses vergers qui frissonnaient dans la joie, le soleil dorait les épis, et la fécondité de la terre s'exhalait en poussières odorantes."¹

On reading this, one is not likely to recall Pascal's dictum: "When you see a natural style, you are astounded and ravished"; nor is one impressed by the presence of what Newman calls "the charm of an incommunicable simplicity." And it is, I think, to do France a disservice to extol his classic simplicity; for attention is thus diverted from qualities of his style which are not primarily classic, and are not compatible with simplicity, qualities which are evident in the first passage quoted from *Thaïs* and still more in the second, and which will be felt by the ordinary intelligent reader to be far more characteristic of his best work than simplicity: namely, richness and sensuous suggestiveness.

Classic simplicity of style results from explicitness and directness of expression. Sophocles and Dante aim to produce their desired effects by reliance upon a bold outline, impressive in its strength; Anatole France gains his by picturesqueness, by sinuosity of movement, by richness, color, warmth, and suggestiveness. The last word calls to mind one of France's dominant traits, his sensuousness, which cannot be separated from his sensuality. Suggestiveness, the call to sensuous revery—this is the great contribution of Romanticism to the world of literature.

¹ *Thaïs*, 44.

One has but to compare the passages I have quoted above with any of the characteristic examples of the ancient manner to be aware of the great gulf which separates classic simplicity from Romantic richness. Or set side by side a famous phrase of Pascal's and a representative passage of Anatole France:

"Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie."

"Il s'en allait donc par les chemins solitaires. Quand venait le soir, le murmure des tamaris, caressés par la brise, lui donnait le frisson, et il rabattait son capuchon sur ses yeux pour ne plus voir la beauté des choses."¹

Rousseau and Chateaubriand have intervened between these two sentences. And it would seem unfortunate to confound two styles utterly unlike, each supreme in its own kind, the one simple, majestic, and powerful, the other rich, suggestive, sensuous.

The truth is, I think, that France was not simple temperamentally; and it is not, I feel convinced, simplicity of style that has brought him honor. His laudatory critics, without exception, so far as I remember, mention with enthusiasm his classic simplicity, and then pass on to dilate at length on the richness, and warmth, and color, and sensuous cadences of his style: greatest praise is regularly accorded the former; but greatest attention and, without much doubt, though his commentators seem strangely loath to admit it, greatest admiration fall to the lot of the latter. France writes simply at times, as every writer does, even Chateaubriand, but if he wrote constantly as he writes in his uninspired moments, or even as in the story of the doll and Uncle Victor in *Sylvestre Bonnard*,—a passage of true Herodotean simplicity,—it is dubious whether he would ever have been heralded as

¹ *Thaïs*, 27.

the great contemporary stylist. It is the Romantic virtues of his style which have made his fame.

3

There are two reasons, I think, why France has been mistakenly lauded for his classic simplicity. The first is that he is frequently more sparing in his use of epithets than Chateaubriand and the other Romanticists. It is true that whenever a critic wishes to show France's style at its best, he invariably chooses for illustration passages which are almost as lavishly adorned as corresponding passages of Chateaubriand. However, in almost all his books there are long stretches in which France shows something of the classic restraint. The economy evident in these portions of his work, though they are certainly not the most admired, is responsible, in part, for the description of France as a simple writer.¹

The second reason why he is praised for his simplicity is that it is very easy to confuse simplicity and lucidity. The former term includes far more than the latter. When France inveighed against the Symbolist ideal of obscurity, he did so in the name not of classic simplicity, but of classic lucidity:

"I cannot pardon the Symbolists their profound obscurity. 'Thou speakest in enigmas' is a reproach addressed to one another frequently by warriors and kings in the tragedies of Soph-

¹ Though he is often sparing in the use of ornamental epithets, he has a habit, which becomes finally somewhat exasperating, of piling up predicate adjectives in a way that is certainly unusual among writers who are recognized as great stylists. The substance of human nature is "harsh, egotistical, jealous, sensual, ferocious." Man is "egotistical, avaricious, cowardly and cruel, stupid and mad by turns." God is "envious, stupid, wicked, an enemy of joy and love," or "stupid, ferocious, ignorant, cruel, gross, foul-mouthed, the most foolish and wicked of gods."

M. Bergeret is taking a walk under the elms on the mall, "l'âme vague, diverse, éparse, vieille comme la terre, jeune comme les fleurs des pom-

ocles. The Greeks were subtle; they demanded, however, that words carry a clear meaning. I think they were right. I am beyond the happy age when one admires what one does not comprehend. I love light. . . . I want to understand immediately. . . . The older I become, the more I feel that that only is beautiful which is easy to understand."⁷

Though one may frequently be in doubt as to the underlying implications of France's thought, there is never the slightest question as to what his words actually say: the superficial meaning is always clear. He merits the highest praise in that he made a constant and notably successful effort to acquire the lucidity which characterizes the great writers of the past; especially since he lived in a generation which paid court to writers like the Symbolists in France and James and Meredith in England, who would not or could not write clearly. But lucidity is only a condition of simplicity. It is not synonymous with simplicity.

The passages I quoted from *Thaïs* exemplify my statement that France writes clearly. And the first and the third are economical in the use of epithets, while the second is not overburdened, in comparison with most nineteenth century descriptive writing. All, however, are, by virtue of their richness, their sensuousness, and the feminine grace of their cadences, nearer to the prose of the Romanticists than to that of the seventeenth century.

I have chosen examples which show strikingly the qualities I have been discussing. Naturally, others may be found, in which these qualities are lacking or are inconspicuous. But it will be recognized, I think, by readers familiar with France that the examples I have offered are

miers, vide de pensées et pleine d'images confuses, désolée et désirante, douce, innocente, lascive, triste, trainant sa fatigue et poursuivant des Illusions et des Espérances, dont il ignorait le nom, la forme, le visage."

¹ *Vie littéraire*, II, 207-208.

truly representative. And passages in which a tendency is revealed with exceptional distinctness may legitimately be brought forward if they serve to call attention to qualities generally present in the most admired portions of an author's work. What I have considered the characteristic virtues of France's style might be illustrated from any of his writings, even from his criticism. The following is a passage from the *Vie littéraire*:

"Il est donc plus juste que je me défende tout seul. J'essayerai de le faire, mais non pas sans avoir d'abord rendu hommage à la vaillance de mon adversaire. M. Brunetière est un critique guerrier d'une intrépidité rare. Il est, en polémique, de l'école de Napoléon et des grands capitaines qui savent qu'on ne se défend victorieusement qu'en prenant l'offensive et que, se laisser attaquer, c'est être déjà à demi vaincu. Et il est venu m'attaquer dans mon petit bois, au bord de mon onde pure."¹

Here are lucidity and comparative economy in the use of epithets: two classic virtues. But here too is a sensuousness of cadence which is distinctly Romantic. And note the last sentence: all the preceding part of the passage cunningly prepares for this climax. When I say "cunningly prepares" I am anticipating my discussion of a quality of France's style which is antipodal to simplicity: its disingenuousness. The economy of the previous sentences and the mild sensuousness of their cadences are designed to give added intensity to the poignant sensuousness of the last. This sensuousness is felt in the harmony of the phrase, in the richness and length of the vowels in the last two words (*onde pure*), and—here once more I am anticipating a point which I shall take up later—in the warm immediacy inherent in the sudden, intimate intrusion of the author's personality.

I may seem to have made too much of a short passage. Examples are never satisfactory; at best they can but re-

¹ III, iv.

mind a reader of an impression he has already gained, or invite him to test a critic's conclusions by turning to his author's work.¹ This extract from the *Vie littéraire* seems

¹ M. Michaut, with genuine and enthusiastic admiration, chooses out of all the work of France the following passages (in addition to the one I quote from *Thaïs*: *Au matin, il vit . . .*) as illustrative of the master when he is at his best, when he is most original, when he displays his characteristic qualities, including, in M. Michaut's opinion, simplicity:

"A travers les mers transparentes, il regardait s'épanouir les anémones de mer et le corail fleurir, tandis qu'au-dessus des madrépores délicats et des étincelants coquillages, les poissons de pourpre, d'azur et d'or faisaient d'un coup de queue jaillir des étincelles." (*Balthazar*, 253.)

"Le sentier descendait en pente douce jusqu'au bord du lac, qui apparut aux deux enfants dans sa languissante et silencieuse beauté. Des saules arrondissaient sur les bords leur feuillage tendre. Des roseaux balançaient leurs glaives souples et leurs délicats panaches: ils formaient des îles frissonnantes autour desquelles les nénuphars étalaient leurs grandes feuilles en cœur et leurs fleurs à chair blanche. Sur ces îles fleuries, les demoiselles, au corsage d'émeraude ou de saphir et aux ailes de flamme, traçaient d'un vol strident des courbes brusquement brisées. Et les deux enfants trempaient avec délices leurs pieds brûlants dans le gravier humide où couraient la pesse touffue et la massette aux longs dards. L'acore leur jetait les parfums de son humble tige; autour d'eux le plantain déroulait sa dentelle au bord des eaux dormantes, que l'épiloque étoilait de ses fleurs violettes." (*Balthazar*, 189.)

"Les ormes du mail revêtaient à peine leurs membres sombres d'une verdure fine comme une poussière et pâle. Mais, sur le penchant du coteau, couronné de vieux murs, les arbres fleuris des vergers offraient leur tête ronde et blanche ou leur rose quenouille au jour clair et palpitant qui riait entre deux bourrasques. Et la rivière au loin, riche des pluies printanières, coulait, blanche et nue, frôlant de ses hanches pleines les lignes des grêles peupliers qui bordaient son lit, voluptueuse, invincible, féconde, éternelle, vraie déesse, comme au temps où les bateliers de la Gaule romaine lui offraient des pièces de cuivre et dressaient en son honneur, devant le temple de Vénus et d'Auguste, une stèle votive, où l'on voyait rudement sculptée une barque avec ses avirons. Partout, dans la vallée bien ouverte, la jeunesse timide et charmante de l'année frissonnait sur la terre antique. Et M. Bergeret cheminait seul, d'un pas inégal et lent, sous les ormes du mail. Il allait, l'âme vague, diverse, éparse, vieille comme la terre, jeune comme les fleurs des pommiers, vide de pensées et pleine d'images confuses, désolée et désirante, douce, innocente, lascive, triste, trainant sa fatigue et poursuivant des Illusions et des Espérances, dont il ignorait le nom, la forme, le visage." (*Mannequin d'Osier*, 220-221.)

"La nuit répandait sa paix sur la campagne silencieuse. La terre, chauffée tout le jour par un soleil pesant, par un 'gras soleil,' comme

to me, like those from *Thaïs*, to illustrate the qualities in France which the world really admires, and true simplicity

disent les moissonneurs du val de Vire, exhalait une odeur forte et chaude. Au ras du sol, des parfums d'herbe traînaient lourdement. . . . Après un demi-siècle, les souvenirs remontent tout frais et clairs à la surface de mon âme sous ce ciel étoilé qui n'a pas changé . . . et dont les clartés immuables et sereines verront sans faillir bien d'autres écoliers, comme j'étais, devenir des savants catarrheux et chenus comme je suis. Etoiles qui avez lui sur la tête légère ou pesante de mes ancêtres oubliés, c'est à votre clarté que je sens s'éveiller en moi un regret douloureux. . . ." (*Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*, 95-97.)

"La nuit était tranquille et chaude. Une ombre transparente baignait la fine chevelure de l'acacia, dont nous voyions les fleurs tombées former des traînées blanches dans notre cour. Le chien dormait, les pattes hors de sa niche. La terre était trempée au loin d'un bleu céleste. Nous nous taisions tous trois. Alors, dans le silence, dans l'auguste silence de la nuit, Suzanne leva le bras . . ." (*Livre de mon Ami*, 219.)

"La pluie froide et tranquille, qui tombe lentement du ciel gris, frappe mes vitres à petits coups comme pour m'appeler; elle ne fait qu'un bruit léger et pourtant la chute de chaque goutte retentit tristement dans mon coeur. Tandis qu'assis au foyer, les pieds sur les chenets, je sèche a un feu de sarments la boue salubre du chemin et du sillon, la pluie monotone retient ma pensée dans une rêverie mélancolique, et je songe. Il faut partir. L'automne secoue sur les bois ses voiles humides. Cette nuit, les arbres sonores frémissaient aux premiers battements de ses ailes dans le ciel agité, et voici qu'une tristesse paisible est venue de l'occident avec la pluie et la brume. Tout est muet. Les feuilles jaunies tombent sans chanter dans les allées; les bêtes résignées se taisent: on n'entend que la pluie; et ce grand silence pèse sur mes lèvres et sur ma pensée." (*Vie littéraire* II, 275-276.)

"La nuit était profonde. La lune versait sur le fleuve ses clartés liquides qui y tremblaient avec le reflet des lanternes. Le vol des éphémères nous enveloppait de ses tourbillons légers. La voie aigüe des insectes s'élevait dans le silence de l'univers. Une telle douceur descendait du ciel qu'il semblait qu'il se mêlât du lait à la clarté des étoiles." (*Rôtisserie*, 141.)

"A l'angle de la rue des Ecrivains, j'entendis une voix grasse et profonde qui chantait. . . . Et je ne tardai pas à voir, du côté d'où venait cette voix, frère Ange qui, son bissac ballant sur l'épaule et tenant par la taille Catherine la dentellière, marchait dans l'ombre d'un pas chance-lant et triomphal, faisant jaillir sous ses sandales l'eau du ruisseau en magnifiques gerbes de boue, qui semblaient célébrer sa gloire crapuleuse, comme les bassins de Versailles font jouer leurs machines en l'honneur des rois. . . . La tête renversée sur l'épaule du moine, Catherine riait. Un rayon de lune tremblait sur ses lèvres humides et dans ses yeux comme dans l'eau des fontaines." (*Ibid.*, 101.)

is not among them: sensuousness, richness, warmth (which proceeds from a sense of immediate contact with the author in person), and especially that disingenuous cleverness which

"L'air humide, tiédi par un soleil encore faible et déjà généreux, soufflait l'inquiète douceur du printemps. Thérèse, accoudée à la balustrade, baignait ses yeux dans la lumière. A ses pieds, les cyprès élevaient leurs quenouilles noires et les oliviers moutonnaient sur les pentes. Au creux de la vallée, Florence étendait ses dômes, ses tours et la multitude de ses toits rouges, à travers laquelle l'Arno laissait deviner à peine sa ligne ondoiyante. Au delà, bleuissaient les collines." (*Lys rouge*, 127.)

"J'étais à Sienne au printemps. . . . J'allais me promener, le soir, après souper, sur la route sauvage du Monte Oliveto, où, dans le crépuscule, de grands boeufs blancs accouplés traînaient, comme au temps du vieil Evandre, un char rustique aux roues pleines. Les cloches de la ville sonnaient la mort tranquille du jour, et la pourpre du soir tombait avec une majesté mélancholique sur la chaîne basse des collines. Quand déjà les noirs escadrons des corneilles avaient gagné les remparts, seul dans le ciel d'opale, un épervier tournait les ailes immobiles, au-dessus d'une yeuse isolée. J'allais au-devant du silence, de la solitude et des douces épouvantes qui grandissaient devant moi. Insensiblement la marée de la nuit recouvrait la campagne. Le regard infini des étoiles clignait au ciel. Et dans l'ombre, les mouches de feu faisaient palpiter sur les buissons leur lumière amoureuse. . . . Tout le long de mon chemin, elles vibraient dans les herbes et dans les arbustes, se cherchant et parfois, à l'appel du désir, traçant au-dessus de la route l'arc enflammé de leur vol." (*Puits de Sainte-Claire*, 1-2.)

These are precisely the sort of passages selected by all critics to illustrate the most admirable virtues of France's style. Their literary excellence is not to be questioned for a moment, but it is certainly Romantic, and certainly not classic. The quality which attracts here is not simplicity; it is what I call sensuousness, what I shall later agree with M. Michaut in defining as voluptuous appeal. "All these passages," he says (p. 272), ". . . have a common character. As you read them, a kind of physical voluptuousness steals over you."

It is to be remarked that in these chosen extracts there is a noticeable lack of that economy in the use of ornamental epithets which impresses the reader of large portions of France's work.

I have accumulated these typical passages from France's works in one place so as to avoid the necessity of offering illustrative examples at every turn in the discussion which follows. The reader will easily test my opinions by referring to the examples conveniently gathered together here. And I have accepted the extracts chosen by M. Michaut, a notable admirer of Anatole France as a stylist, rather than make my own selections, in order that there should be no doubt that what is offered is representative.

half conceals the implications of a thought in words of extraordinary clarity—a *seeming* artlessness which is the antithesis of simplicity.

4

I hope, as I proceed, to make clearer my contention that what is admired by the world in the style of Anatole France is really those Romantic virtues which I have just enumerated, and not the classic simplicity that France seems to be describing in a much-discussed passage which I cannot forbear quoting entire:

“Whatever wins its vogue only by some trick of novelty and whim of aesthetic taste ages fast. Fashions change in Art as in everything else. There are catch-words that come up and profess to be new, just like the frocks from the great dressmakers’ in the Rue de la Paix. Like them, they only last a season. At Rome, in the decadent periods of Art, the statues of the Empresses showed the hair dressed in the latest mode. Soon these coiffures looked ridiculous; so they had to be changed, and the figures were given marble wigs. It were only fitting that a style as rococo as these statues should be reperiwigged every year. The fact is, in these days, when we live so fast, literary schools last but a few years, sometimes but a few months. I know young writers whose style is already two or three generations out of date, and seems quite archaic. This is the result, doubtless, of the marvellous progress in industry and machinery that carries modern communities along in its dizzy sweep. In the days of MM. de Goncourt and railways, we could still spend a fairly long time over an artistic piece of writing. But since the telephone, Literature, which depends on contemporary manners, renews its formulas with an altogether disconcerting rapidity. So we will merely agree with M. Ludovic Halévy that the simple form is the only one adapted to travel peacefully, we will not say down the centuries, that is assuming too much, but at any rate down the years.

“The only difficulty is to define what the simple form is,—and it must be allowed to be a great one.

"Nature, at any rate as we can know her, and in an environment adapted for organic life, offers us nothing simple, and Art cannot aspire to more simplicity than Nature. Yet we understand well enough what we all mean, when we say such and such a style is simple, and such and such another is not.

"I will say this much then, that if properly speaking there is no simple style, there are styles which appear simple, and it is just these that carry youth and power of duration with them. It is only left now to inquire whence they get this lucky appearance. Doubtless we shall conclude they owe it, not to the fact of their being less rich than others in divers elements, but rather because they form a whole in which all the parts are so thoroughly blended that they cannot be distinguished separately. A good style, in fact, is like yonder beam of light that shines in at my window as I write, and which owes its pure brilliancy to the intimate combination of the seven colors of which it is made up. A simple style is like white light. It is complex, but does not seem so. This is only a simile after all, and we know what such parallels are worth when it is not a poet that draws them. What I wanted to make plain is this: in language, true simplicity, the simplicity that is good and desirable, is only apparent, and results solely from the fine co-ordination and sovereign economy of the several parts of the whole." ¹

France is right when he says that there is no such thing as absolute simplicity in a work of art. But, in his usual manner, he makes much of a little thing, and creates an impression which is distorted. The very artful and calculated simplicity which he analyzes is totally alien to Homer and Herodotus, and it is not descriptive of any great classic writing, ancient or modern. A style that is truly simple has an element of artificiality (this word being understood in its best sense), but it is certainly not a complex style in disguise. And it *is* "less rich than others in divers elements," if the reference here is to Romantic virtues. France is defining his own simplicity, which is not simplicity at all. It is the op-

¹ *Jardin d'Epicure*, 104-108; translated by Alfred Allinson.

posite of simplicity; it is ingeniousness; it is dust in the reader's eyes.

In the passage quoted, are two phrases which, if properly understood, excellently describe the central aim of classic art: "a whole in which all the parts are so thoroughly blended that they cannot be distinguished separately," and, "the fine coördination and sovereign economy of the several parts of the whole." In these phrases the basis of the Greek ideal of simplicity would be admirably expressed, except for the vitally important fact that France is using them in reference to style conceived as a separate entity. The Greeks could never have understood the application of the term simplicity to style, irrespective of content and structure. The consideration of style as a thing apart has always been reprehended by admirers of classic art. Newman, for instance, touches upon this misconception in a well-known lecture. Some men, he says, "consider fine writing to be an *addition from without* to the matter treated of,—a sort of ornament superinduced, or a luxury indulged in, by those who have time and inclination for such vanities. They speak as if *one* man could do the thought, and *another* the style."

The classicist's primary concern is never with style; it is with thought and structure; and he never separates these three elements of composition. This fact explains the broad line of cleavage between classic art and that of Anatole France. Simplicity and naturalness for the classicist refer to the whole work; they are terms used by him to describe the artist's way of presenting life: his choice of subject, his organization of his material, his plot, his structure; and only incidentally his way of writing. For Anatole France they describe the way of writing—style.

France never escaped entirely from his devotion to form, this term being defined in the sense in which it was generally

understood by his early friends, the Parnassians. For the classicist the term form has reference to structure; for Anatole France, as for most of the Parnassians, it has reference to expression, style. Again and again he declares, sometimes oracularly, the preëminence of form; again and again he disparages the claims of composition. His practise accords with his theory: the words "the fine coördination and sovereign economy of the several parts of the whole" define, for him, simplicity of form in the modern sense of style, in which he is a master, not in the ancient sense of structure, in which he is notoriously deficient.

Style to the classicist is always subordinate to content. So even Horace scorns "verses destitute of substance, and melodious trifles."¹ And it is subordinate also to structure. Socrates asks Phaedrus:

"And suppose a person were to come to Sophocles or Euripides and say that he knows how to make a very long speech about a small matter, and a short speech about a great matter, and also a sorrowful speech, or terrible, or threatening speech, or any other kind of speech, and in teaching this fancies that he is teaching the art of tragedy?"

And Phaedrus replies:

"They too would surely laugh at him if he fancies that tragedy is anything but the arranging of these elements in a manner which will be suitable to one another and to the whole."²

The weightiest thesis in Aristotle's *Poetics* is the one which asserts that in literary art story and action are more important than all else.

The material must be simple and natural, and the arrangement of it—the structure—simple and natural, in order that

¹ *Versus inopes rerum nugaeque canorae. Ars poetica*, 332.

² *Phaedrus*, 268 (Jowett).

the whole may seem simple and natural and produce the illusion of reality. Style was, to the Greeks, merely an instrument to this ulterior end. To Anatole France it is an end in itself.

With him, style, occupying not an ancillary but a capital position, becomes the object of a cult. When style takes precedence of matter and structure to this extent, it can remain simple only if the writer himself is temperamentally simple. If he is, as Anatole France is, an idolator of beauty—rich, warm, sensuous beauty; a thinker of subtle mind, delighting in the devious rather than in the direct; detached, with no flaming zeal in the service of a truth which he burns to set forth vigorously and forcefully: if the writer is such a man, and concerns himself primarily with style, as such men usually do,—his expression may frequently seem simple, and at times it may even be simple, but it will be prevailingly stamped by that richness and sensuousness which delight the reader of *Thaïs*.

5

“Let us be careful,” says France, “not to write too well; that is the worst possible manner of writing.” And again he says, translating the proverbial *ars est celare artem*, “The only true art is that which conceals itself:” the artist is to achieve simplicity and naturalness by the concealment of his art. These two wise counsels are at the heart of France’s attack upon the Symbolists. His criticism of their wilful obscurity is thoroughly sound. He avoids with outstanding success their blunder and demonstrates the virtue of classic lucidity. But if any writer bears constantly in mind the doctrine that “the only true art is that which conceals itself,” and applies it especially, exclusively even, as

does France, to style,—regarding style not as a means but as an end,—it is doubtful if he can succeed in his aim: the striving to produce an effect will appear and his purpose be thereby frustrated.¹

France's style is deliberately artistic. The discerning reader is conscious of the meticulous care with which this wondrous form is beaten out of resisting metal. He has no need of the information proffered by one of the magician's Boswells: "When you glance at his manuscripts, you are appalled to see what toil has been the price of that apparent facility and that abandoned grace."² In reading Homer, or Sophocles, or Dante, one is not tempted to stop and ponder long and deep on the processes by which the excellence of their style has been secured. The effect is felt, but attention is not drawn to the means of producing it. And yet no one imagines that they wrote easily, without travail of spirit. They have successfully concealed their art and have attained their aim: to depict simply and naturally, and hence effectively, the vicissitudes of human life. Anatole France does not conceal his art, for he tarries at the inn. Austere indeed is the reader who would not be tempted to tarry with him. But if one tarries too long at the inn, one does not

¹ Of Chateaubriand, Flaubert, and the writers of the nineteenth century generally, France is reported to have said: "You feel in them the desire to produce an effect, to be stylists; and that is precisely why they seem to me different from their ancestors." Ségur, 118.

² Gsell, 67. Compare M. Brousseau's frequently reproduced story of the numerous publisher's proofs which France required. (See below, page 268.) If this amusing story is studied carefully, I think it would not be found to be a refutation of my description of France as an indolent man. And the manuscripts at which M. Gsell marvels, while they are doubtless an indication of France's patience, are hardly a sure sign of industry and toil. In any case, even an indolent man can endure the efforts of brief duration incident to corrections which concern style, while he would recoil before the labor demanded by composition. I suspect that the explanation of France's preference for style and neglect of structure is to be sought, in part, in his indolence.

reach the end of one's journey, and no writer is truly classic who does not carry his reader past all inns, even the most inviting,—permitting him no more than a brief, pleasurable delay in the best-favored,—to the end of his journey.

"Let us be careful," says France, "not to write too well; that is the worst possible manner of writing. Languages are the spontaneous productions of peoples. They must not be used too fastidiously. They have in themselves a robust tang of the soil: nothing is gained by sprinkling them with musk. It is a mistake to use too many ancient terms, and the affectation of archaism is not wise." The French language is "so generously responsive to the artist's efforts if he does not do violence to it! . . . Let us not torment either sentences or thoughts."¹

These are the precepts by adherence to which the artist may conceal his art, create the impression of simplicity and naturalness, and avoid artificiality. France himself does not observe them: he uses the pliant French language very fastidiously; there is little of the tang of the soil in his style; one cannot deny that it is very often sprinkled with musk and that it readily and frequently affects the archaic in diction and manner. His style is simple often; but it is generally removed from simplicity by its richness, its sensuousness, and its suggestiveness, or by the insistent recurrence of that engaging archaic note which serves the Romantic purposes of producing a "sensation of agreeable surprise," and of "adding strangeness to beauty."²

¹ *Vie littéraire*, II, 213-214.

² These two aesthetic effects were sought by Anatole France and the Romanticists not only by recourse to the archaic in diction and manner but in other ways also, by carrying their readers, for instance, into foreign lands and alien times, in particular into the Middle Ages. He and they were fascinated always by the bizarre and unfamiliar in life and character as well as in style. "Is it not a happy instinct that drives the poet into distant lands and remote ages for his subjects? He finds there the mystery and strangeness which he needs so much, for there is poetry only in that which we do not know. There is poetry only in the desire for the im-

There are very few of his works of fiction, I think it may safely be said, in which he does not cultivate the Romantic literary virtue which resides in a tactful use of ancient terms. He does so in the *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque*, and in other volumes concerned with the eighteenth century, in *Jeanne d'Arc*, and in a very large number of his short stories. *Thaïs* and the *Ile des Pingouins* are not untouched by the charm of archaism. The style of *Sylvestre Bonnard*, the tone of the whole book, has a distinct flavor of pleasant pedantry which carries the reader out of the "dust and smoke and noise" of this workaday world into a remote, blither air. The volumes of the *Histoire contemporaine* too are, in part, couched in an unusual idiom which produces an agreeable effect of quaintness. "Pastiche" is the word the French use in describing the imitative quality under discussion. Ordinarily they use the term disdainfully; it must not be so understood in connection with Anatole France, however, for one of the chief charms of his work lies precisely in his power to remove his subject and scene from the troubled atmosphere of actuality by a style which is affected,¹ archaic, artificial, and delightful.

At the very moment that Aristotle is urging the orator to speak naturally, not artificially, he counsels him to cultivate an artificial style. "Deviation from the ordinary idiom," he says, "makes diction more impressive; for as men are differently impressed by foreigners and by their fellow-citi-

possible or in the regret for the irreparable." *Vie littéraire*, I, 104. Here France speaks like a true Romanticist.

¹ I refer the reader who is shocked by my statement that France's style is affected to the following passage from the master's unfinished "Dialogue on Old Age":

"Camille Doucet said to me when he read my first book: 'You are affected, and that affectation renders your book difficult to read.' I replied that the affectation would no longer appear as soon as the public became accustomed to my style. It became accustomed to it." Corday, 97.

zens, so are they affected by styles. Hence we ought to give a foreign air to our language; for men admire what is far from them, and what is admired is pleasant." Then he says that we should disguise our art and seem to speak naturally, not artificially; and adds: "A successful illusion is wrought when the composer picks his words from the language of daily life; this is what Euripides does, and first hinted the way to do."¹

All this is somewhat confused, but it is clear at least from what is quoted here, and from the context, that though naturalness and the avoidance of artificiality seem to Aristotle desirable, he would not have them valued to the detriment of distinction, with which they are not incompatible, if discreetly cultivated.

Simplicity, naturalness, and artificiality are terms which have been interpreted with far more rigor by moderns than by ancients. The artist, the latter thought, must *seem* to be writing naturally. But he will avoid meanness above all. He will, to be sure, seek to make his style appropriate: his slaves will not speak like his kings. But even the diction of slaves will be elevated. Naturalness to the point of exact reproduction of the speech of daily life was not a quality sought by the Greeks.

France is right when he says that there are styles which seem simple but none that are really simple. The classic style is, in truth, neither simple nor natural in the sense in which these words are commonly used to-day. It is a work of art, artificial. But the artist is able to create the impression of a simple, natural style because style is to him a mere instrument and is rendered unobtrusive by virtue of this fact. He aims to make it appropriate, that is, properly

¹ *Rhetoric*, III, ii, 4 (Jebb).

submissive to character and theme; and he subdues it to the higher interests of thought and structure. Thus does the classicist "disguise" his art. For reasons the reverse of these France's art is not concealed, and his style produces the impression not of naturalness and simplicity but of artificiality.

Though the Greek looked upon style as a mere instrument, subordinate to content and structure, he was by no means, of course, unconscious of its legitimate claims. I have said that to-day we interpret such rhetorical terms as simplicity much more literally than did the Greeks. The reaction against the aesthetic movement of yesterday (of which Anatole France was *magna pars*) has resulted in a disparagement of "style" and an exaltation of simplicity and directness which are likely to cause all that I have said in this connection to be misinterpreted. The antipathy to "mere style," a result of the excesses of the last few generations before our own, has naturally, but very unfortunately, brought about a demand for writing which has no style at all; and simplicity, conceived as antipodal to style, has become a literary virtue as never before.

The effort to write simply in order to avoid style, the Greeks would never have understood. It was, in fact, in order to acquire a nobler style—*more* style rather than none at all—that the simple style was gradually evolved during the fifth century. Simplicity, it must not be forgotten, does not characterize all classic styles, but only some of them. The epic style is a simple style; the tragic style of Sophocles is more simple than that of Aeschylus, and Euripides is simpler than either, but the choral odes of all three are ornate. On the whole, however, in the course of the fifth century all Greek styles become progressively more simple; and Greek prose is, in general, marked by a studied simplicity.

To-day, as in ancient Greece, content is considered paramount to style; and for that reason simplicity is being exalted. But in order to attain simplicity, the Greeks, worshippers of beauty always, did not neglect the aesthetic values of expression. To subordinate style to content and structure did not mean to them to write without style; to be sparing in the use of epithets did not mean to use them not at all; to avoid excess of sensuousness did not mean to write without color and warmth; to practise restraint and moderation did not mean to eschew emotion; so, to praise simplicity did not imply the eulogy of graceless statement of fact, unadorned, unheightened by the magic of beautiful and varied expression.

That the simple style of the Greeks was not formless and unbeautiful may be seen by a glance at such typical examples as the first three books of the *Iliad*, the beginning of *Oedipus at Colonus*, the beginning and end of the *Phaedo*. Here there is no mere decoration, but there is no lack, certainly, of beauty; epithets and other rhetorical means of heightening the artistic effect, graces of expression and charms which belong to style, are not absent, though they are used with economy; emotion, without which a work is hardly literature at all, is restrained, but for that very reason it is doubly intense.¹

When Greek style is simple, it is unobtrusive, but it is not unfelt; and it is rarely barren, expressionless, unbeautiful, unemotional. It is the object of the artist's constant care, but he does not forget that its mission is to subserve the interests of theme and structure.

¹ "Then beauty of style and harmony and grace and good rhythm depend on simplicity,—I mean the true simplicity of a rightly and nobly ordered mind and character, not that other simplicity which is only an euphemism for folly?"—"Very true." Plato, *Republic*, 400 (Jowett).

"Languages are the spontaneous productions of peoples." That is probably true. But these same languages in the hands of artists are removed far from their origin. The French literary language, in particular, has been ever since the beginning of the Renaissance a thing apart from the language of the people; with Anatole France it moves farther away still. In his hands it is enriched by the verbal reminiscences of learned reading in pagan, medieval, Renaissance, and eighteenth century authors, especially the forgotten authors, who carry with them more perceptibly than the masters the aroma of bygone ages; it takes its peculiar stamp from a mind of wide and varied literary culture; it is touched by the affectation of pleasant archaism and quaint pedantry. Erudite and infinitely refined—and such it is when it is at its best—it bears only the remotest resemblance to a language which is the spontaneous production of a people. Good style, as France by his practise could prove to every attentive reader, may well be, contrary to his theory, not at all spontaneous in the sense that languages are the spontaneous production of peoples, but fastidious, with little or no rusticity, unharmed by a slight sprinkling of musk, affected, artificial, and not averse to subtlety.

Let us consider again a passage from *Thaïs* quoted above:

"Il s'en allait donc par les chemins solitaires. Quand venait le soir, le murmure des tamaris, caressés par la brise, lui donnait le frisson, et il rabattait son capuchon sur ses yeux pour ne plus voir la beauté des choses."

I doubt whether there is any other contemporary writer capable of consistently producing prose like this. There is no

genuine simplicity, naturalness, or spontaneity here; but there is something else that is very fine—there is penetrating and voluptuous charm.

Such a style is admirable indeed. But as I have already said, when style takes precedence of thought and structure, when it calls attention to itself, the danger is great that its very virtues may prove wearisome. As one reads page after page as exquisitely wrought as the lines just quoted, an uncomfortable doubt forces itself upward from the subconscious mind in which it has been incubating and gaining strength: these delicately modulated cadences begin to seem a trifle mechanical; these graces little by little cloy, take on a factitious, mannered, mincing air; this demureness comes to look like priggishness; the languor of a half-felt sensual stimulus becomes disagreeably irritating. One begins to fear that the musk has been sprinkled somewhat too generously over these soft charms; the harmony of *quand venait le soir* begins to appear a little artificial and one feels oneself capable of sympathizing with the bourgeois or with the rustic who wonders why *quand le soir venait* is not good enough. And the learned simplicity of the powerfully effective reticence in *la beauté des choses* contrasts a little too violently with the daring of *tamaris caressés par la brise*. We revert to the beginning of *Thaïs*, to the page which, when we first read it, struck us as simple, virile, sincere. But now at the second reading, haunted by our author's sensuous cadences, we detect here too the same charms, and wonder at our earlier insensibility. Never again when we read France will the melody of his cadences cease to flatter our ear, for the now familiar harmony lives even in those passages which seem simplest, most crystalline, most naïve. Even in these, though words and phrases may be untouched by the magic of rich imagery, we are lapped in soft Lydian airs, and a

quaint or archaic tone adds strangeness to beauty. But force and inviolate candor melt in witchery and seduction: Hercules must doff his lion's skin to take up the distaff of Omphale. We long for a page of vigorous prose, unequivocally simple, compact of strength and essential, unadventitious beauty, to relieve the monotone of a grace which is infinitely enticing, but unsinewed, effeminate.

Thus does a distinguished style prove insufficient. Style is but an indispensable handmaid; when it becomes mistress, its very virtues betray it. All the charm of France's style cannot make us forget that style is only an integument. To suffice lastingly, it must be strong as well as beautiful; and it cannot be more precious than the life which it enfolds.

CHAPTER II

THE IRONIST

1

I HAVE tried to restate a truth which is, I think, generally, if not universally, recognized—that the greatest artists look upon style as a means to an end and not as an end in itself. I have brought forward ancient writers for comparison merely because France's style has been constantly described as classic; I might, of course, have drawn upon the experience of modern writers to demonstrate a fact which an ultra-modern, Rémy de Gourmont, states bluntly and categorically: "Style alone," he says, "is nothing."¹ France will live by virtue of his style; that is his glory; all else about his works—thought, character, plot—is lacking in the excellence which endures. He has thus completely reversed the classic order. His style alone commends him. And, great work of art that it is, it proves finally insufficient because it is the preponderant object of interest in his work.

Thus the stylistic power of a great artist seems to have misled him.

I am going to try to show now that he has been misled again by undue indulgence of a gift which he possesses in unusual degree. I refer to his ironic manner.

¹ *Problème du Style*, 154. Pater said: "The distinction between great art and good depends, as regards literature at all events, not on its form, but on the matter." An important chapter in the history of art during the late nineteenth century is epitomized in the abandonment of Pater's dictum and the substitution of the following doctrine of Oscar Wilde: "To art's subject-matter we should be more or less indifferent."

An author's manner brings us into an intimate personal relation with him. However impersonal any work of art may be, the individuality of the artist will be to some extent discernible. It will appear most strikingly in his way of treating life, that is, in the substance of his work—in his choice of subject and in his handling of the subject chosen. It will appear also in his style. There are many kinds of style: classic style, eighteenth century style, florid style, journalistic style, abstract style, and a score of others. The writer selects a style, unconsciously or deliberately; and the kind selected is, in a general way, an index to his nature. But manner brings us closer to him, for it effectively expresses the idiosyncratic note in his personality. Running discreetly as an undercurrent through the work, it is pleasing, and its absence would be remarked and regretted. When it makes itself pointedly felt, however, substance and style are in danger of being overshadowed by temperament. The work of Carlyle or of Browning is probably not greater from the fact that it bears on every page the impress of a peculiar, even eccentric, individuality. Great artists have a habit of writing about something greater than themselves; and, modestly disappearing into the background, they submerge themselves in their theme. Their nature, in no dishonoring sense, is subdued to what it works in, like the dyer's hand.

Whenever one finds it necessary to distinguish between manner and style, there is lacking in the work of art under consideration that fine harmony between the personality of the writer, his subject, and his expression which stamps the work of the master: one has no occasion to call special attention to the manner of the greatest writers as distinguished from their style.

When manner is conspicuous, and the personality of the

author is constantly in view, both substance and style tend to lose their significance.¹ Irony is properly an attribute of manner, not of style. I propose to study the development of France's irony, and to try to show that because it is prodigally employed, it comes to dominate and vitiate in large degree both his style and his thought.

2

"Paris, the ancient, the venerable, with its towers and its spires," said Sylvestre Bonnard, "is my life, my very self. I should be nothing without these things, which are reflected in me with the thousand shades of my thought, and inspire and quicken me. That is why I love Paris with an immense love."²

Unlike most of the great French writers of the last half-century, Anatole France was born in Paris. He lived in Paris all his life. He was a Parisian of Parisians. From earliest childhood he found himself at the focus of French intellectual activity, where the French spirit was created and has burned most brightly through the centuries.

Since the Renaissance, the French have cultivated the social arts more eagerly than other nations. In no other country has contact with one's neighbors seemed so indispensable to happiness. The result has been an unusual and perhaps excessive development of those qualities which distinguish men who are at home only when in society. Intimacy of social relation sharpens the wits, and breeds intellectual

¹ Mr. W. C. Brownell in a recent series of brilliant essays, published in a volume entitled *The Genius of Style* (Scribner's), has discussed with his usual acuteness the whole problem of style. He considers at length the relation of style and manner. Goethe was fond of opposing style to manner. See *Einfache Nachahmung der Nature, Manier, Stil* (Jubiläums-Ausgabe, XXXIII, 54 ff.) Compare also the same volume, 251 ff., *et pass.* in all his art criticism.

² *Sylvestre Bonnard*, 195.

keenness, an inclination to exercise that keenness at the expense of others, and a consequent fear, which has been said to be peculiarly French, of being ridiculed or duped. "We are afraid to risk new plays on the stage," said Voltaire, "before a nation in the habit of casting ridicule upon whatever is not sanctioned by usage." A hundred years ago Madame de Staël pointed out that her countrymen were over-civilized, and urged that they try to escape from the tendency to mockery which is indicative of a too highly intellectualized society by seeking rejuvenation in the naïve emotionality of German literature. But her eloquence produced no lasting effect. The French view of life is critical, realistic, unsentimental; Frenchmen, as Madame de Staël said, and as Boileau had declared before her, are inveterate mockers. In such a condition, when men take delight in deriding others and are sensitive to the laughter which turns against themselves, satire thrives. Satire is one of the distinctive modes of expression of the French spirit. Anatole France is in the main current of French literature; his spiritual ancestors are the writers of the medieval *Renard*, and of the fabliaux and farces; they are, especially, Rabelais, Montaigne, Molière, Voltaire.

In England the two extremes of satire have been cultivated: the genial Horatian type, which is characterized by humor, and the invective of Juvenal. The French have, in general, avoided these extremes, and, in conformity with their tendency to the purely intellectual, have produced a type of satire whose peculiar mark is irony.

The humor of Addison, Sterne, Lamb, Dickens is so unusual in French literature that when the *Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard* appeared in 1881 it had almost the appearance of a new *genre*. Among the great masters at least (beside whom Daudet and Tillier were hardly ranked) no one had

written thus. The novelty of the tone accounts, in part, for the puzzled surprise with which the excellence of the work was recognized. One other quality contributed something certainly to the embarrassment with which the book was received. The vein of sentimentality which runs through it, at times even almost too soft for English-speaking readers, must have appeared to the French distinctly "unsanctioned by usage."

That strain of sentimentality which is essential in France's nature appears from time to time in every period of his career, and frequently in unexpected places. It runs through the *Vie littéraire*, for instance. Again and again books discussed in those pleasant volumes seem to derive their importance from the fact that they remind the critic of an agreeable or distressing moment in his own life. Everybody knows that essay in which he reviews the second volume of Renan's *History of the People of Israel* by confiding to his readers the emotions he experienced as a boy in connection with an old illustrated Bible which his mother had given him. The world has been charmed by this touching confidence, which ends as follows:

"Where, I wonder, is my old collection of holy pictures, in which that same Jehovah walked with so much majesty through a Dutch meadow, among white sheep, little Guinea pigs, and Flemish horses?"¹

Perhaps a certain degree of sentimentality is inseparable from humor, and perhaps the French people's instinctive recoil from sentimentality is responsible for their avoidance of the lighter, warmer kinds of satire. *Sylvestre Bonnard* overflows with the indulgent benignity of a lover of humanity such as Terence; it is suffused with kindly wit, and derides

¹ *Vie littéraire*, II, 324.

man and makes sport of life with all the benevolence of an Epicurean like Horace who is satisfied with his lot. It finds old age itself tolerable, even enjoyable. It has difficulty in censuring an unscrupulous schoolmistress and a villainous lawyer. It is as far removed from the world of ordinary reality by its mildness as its author's latest works are by their severity.

The victim of the humorous sallies of the book is usually the diarist himself. He, a master of paleography, was listening one day with increasing pleasure to the conversation of two young students of the same science. He had noted one of them in particular and had prophesied his future eminence. Now he hears them discussing the bibliography of a subject that is dear to him, since he has contributed to it a publication which is, in his eyes, of very great importance. He is delighted by the replies of his favorite till he hears his answer to the question:

"'Have you read Sylvestre Bonnard's study of the Benedictine Abbeys of 1600?'"

"'No, indeed; Bonnard is a fool.'"

"Turning my head," continues the old scholar in his diary, "I noticed that the place where I was sitting was in the shade. It was getting cool and I considered it very silly to risk an attack of rheumatism in order to listen to the impertinence of two young coxcombs."¹

The center of his home was a great room filled with books, known, in fact, as the City of Books. Hamilcar alone was really welcome in the City of Books. Hamilcar was a cat. But one other creature came and went as she pleased—Thérèse, the housekeeper. The old man was not a little timid in his relations with Thérèse. Once when he had determined to make the long and arduous journey to Sicily in

¹ *Sylvestre Bonnard*, 141-142.

pursuit of a valuable fourteenth century manuscript, which had certainly been written by a clerk in the very precincts of the abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, the last and most difficult task before his departure concerned Thérèse:

"My resolve had been taken and my preparations made," he said; "it only remained for me to notify my housekeeper. I must acknowledge it was a long time before I could make up my mind to tell her I was going away. I feared her remonstrances, her raileries, her objurgations, her tears. 'She is a good, kind girl,' I said to myself; 'she is attached to me; she will want to prevent me from going; and the Lord knows that when she has her mind set upon anything, gestures and cries cost her no effort. In this instance she will be sure to call the concierge, the scrubber, the mattress-maker, and the seven sons of the fruit-seller; they will all kneel down in a circle around me; they will begin to cry, and then they will look so ugly that I shall be obliged to yield, so as not to have the pain of seeing them any more.'

"Such were the awful images, the sick dreams, which fear marshalled before my imagination. Yes, fear—"fecund fear," as the poet says—gave birth to these monstrosities in my brain. For—I may as well make the confession in these private pages—I am afraid of my housekeeper. I am aware that she knows I am weak; and this fact alone is sufficient to dispel all my courage in any contest with her. Contests are of frequent occurrence; and I invariably succumb.

"But for all that, I had to announce my departure to Thérèse. She came into the library with an armful of wood to make a little fire—'*une flambée*,' she said. For the mornings are chilly. I watched her out of the corner of my eye while she crouched down at the hearth, with her head in the opening of the fireplace. I do not know how I then found the courage to speak, but I did so without much hesitation. I got up, and, walking up and down the room, observed in a careless tone, with that swaggering manner characteristic of cowards,

"By the way, Thérèse, I am going to Sicily."

"Having thus spoken, I awaited the consequence with great anxiety. Thérèse did not reply. Her head and her vast cap re-

mained buried in the fireplace and nothing in her person, which I closely watched, betrayed the least emotion. She poked some paper under the wood, and blew up the fire. That was all!

"Finally I saw her face again;—it was calm—so calm that it made me vexed. 'Surely,' I thought to myself, 'this old maid has no heart. She lets me go away without saying so much as "Ah!" Can the absence of her old master really affect her so little?"

"'Well, then go, Monsieur,'" she answered, at last, 'only be back here by six o'clock! There is a dish for dinner to-day which will not wait for anybody.'"¹

Only rarely outside of the autobiographical works does Anatole France write in this way. The sentimentality of these volumes, which, especially in *Sylvestre Bonnard*, rises frequently to the plane of pure sentiment, did not, unfortunately, deepen to generous emotion as time went on, but was gradually chilled into submission to a cold rationalism. France is preëminently an intellectual satirist. Humor is hardly compatible with intellectual satire; at its best it is not sentimental though it is always invested with sentiment or emotion. It is allied to pathos and is less alien to tragedy than it is to the French type of comedy, which is essentially rational. In his development, Anatole France deserts the glowing, indulgent humor of *Sylvestre Bonnard* with its tender sympathy for all things human and entrusts himself with increasing confidence to the type of satire whose characteristic is not humor but irony.

3

Irony may be associated with humor and wit in sympathetic raillery of human foibles, but it readily leads to a sterner, more caustic mood. The latter is especially likely in the case of a man like Anatole France, whose pride was in

¹ *Sylvestre Bonnard*, 41-43; translation of Lafcadio Hearn.

his head rather than in his heart; particularly in view of the French tendency to mockery, issue of an over-intellectualized civilization which leans toward ironic subtlety rather than toward the geniality of humorous observation.

There is not a little irony in *Sylvestre Bonnard*. In the old man's references to his father, he almost invariably speaks of his "placid irony," as when he remarks that he smiled at him "with that shade of raillery which gave a certain piquancy to his unfailing gentleness." The irony of *Sylvestre Bonnard* is that of the scholar's father: a piquant raillery which vivifies its unfailing gentleness. Such irony it is difficult to differentiate from humor.

A decided change is felt already, however, in *Balthasar* (1889). Between *Sylvestre Bonnard* (1881) and *Balthasar*, the books published were, with the exception of the *Désirs de Jean Servien* (1882, but written ten years before), in the manner of the former. In the volume which takes its title, *Balthasar*, from the first of the stories collected therein, the tone of *Sylvestre Bonnard* is continued in *Le Réséda du Curé* and in *M. Pigeonneau*. But the tale of the Ethiopian king Balthasar marks the appearance of the biting type of irony which is to become the distinctive trait of the author's manner, and is destined to dominate both his thought and his style, giving to both a peculiar turn which warps their texture. "As Balthasar had lost what he loved, Queen Balkis, he resolved to devote himself to wisdom and to become a sage."¹ The Scriptures have withheld from us the fact that Balthasar was impelled to become one of the three Magi who journeyed to adore at the manger in Bethlehem because his violently sensual love for a wanton queen had been outrageously requited.

¹ *Balthasar*, 22.

This master ironist is bent on showing the vanity of life—especially in its most sacred associations. About a dissolute ecclesiastic who lived two centuries ago he says: “He preferred evil company to good, following His example—who lived among publicans and prostitutes. He preserved there purity of heart, the gift of sympathy, and the treasures of mercy.”¹ There is an irreverence here which is particularly diabolical because its malice is protected by an outward show of naïve piety. Such is the power of irony.

The masterpiece of contemporary irony is probably the well-known story of that governor who ruled Judaea almost two thousand years ago. He is old and infirm now, living in retirement at Baiae. He encounters Aelius Lamia, a friend and protégé of his days at Jerusalem. They review the adventures of their lives, and the former governor of Judaea, Pontius Pilate by name, discourses at great length on the hard problems which beset him when he reigned over the stiff-necked Jews. They separate for the night. The next day Lamia is at supper in Pilate’s house. The discussion of Judæan affairs continues. Neither liked the Jews, but Lamia confesses that he had been interested in the Jewesses. He remembers in particular a certain dancer whose charms would have made Cleopatra pale with envy. He had followed her everywhere. One day she disappeared. After some months he learned that she had joined a small troop of men and women who followed a young wonder-worker from Galilee. “His name was Jesus; he was from Nazareth and was crucified for some crime or other. Do you remember him, Pontius?”

Pontius Pilate frowned and raised his hand to his forehead like one searching his memory. Then, after a few moments

¹ *Opinions de Jérôme Coignard*, 21.

of silence, he said: "Jesus? Jesus of Nazareth? I don't remember."¹

That is all. A tragedy of so much consequence to the world has slipped from the memory of one of the protagonists; and his friend would never have called to mind the crucified wonder-worker of Galilee except for his connection with a certain dancing girl. Of such importance are the things which we esteem most significant in the annals of our lives. The enchanting style, with its exquisite modulation, its softly undulating movement, its insinuating grace, is fitted cunningly to the theme, and so weaves its net about the unsuspecting reader that only at the end of all does he realize he has been trapped—betrayed by the conjurer's spell.

The demonstration, under cover of a pious exterior, or, in the later volumes, overtly, of the impotence of religion when brought into conflict with sensuality is a theme so frequently recurring in the work of Anatole France that it takes on the appearance of a haunting thesis from which he cannot escape.

It is difficult to imagine that anybody could be offended by the tone of the *Procurateur de Judée*. It is a sheer work of art. Its perfection is undimmed by wanton intrusion of the thesis just mentioned, which will become distressing to religious readers in later works of France, particularly on account of the inescapable element of truth it contains, and which, where it is not treated with discretion, will strike even readers of no religious convictions as a lapse from good taste.

This favorite thesis of France is not offensively advanced in the *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque*, for here, though the hero is a sensual priest, yet his manner is so amiably ironical that he sheds upon the religion which he represents some of the affection which he wins for himself. *Thaïs*, which be-

¹ *Procurateur de Judée*, in the *Etui de Nacre*.

longs to the same period, is different: the thesis rises truculently into the foreground, and there it will remain to the end of the author's days, becoming more and more distasteful because it is treated with increasing lack of moderation, and increasing indifference to the truth. *Thaïs* is perhaps the best known of the author's numerous ironic demonstrations of the insufficiency of religion in its contest with sensuality. Its subject and style are redolent of medieval works of edification; and its intention is quite the reverse. The story of the courtesan is the triumph of the spirit over the flesh, but this victory is on the whole insignificant in comparison with the triumph of the flesh over the spirit in the person of Paphnuce. And the sting of the irony lies precisely in the fact that the author may turn upon his accusers with the retort that surely there is nothing more accordant with the doctrines of Holy Church than the salvation of a Mary Magdalen and the damnation of an ascetic who falls from grace.

This new lord of irony attains his purpose all the more effectively because he can at times write in a mood of unimpeachable unction. Some of the stories in the very volume which contains the *Procurateur de Judée* are works of pure edification. He easily surpasses Gibbon in his chosen task of "sapping a solemn creed" by substituting the subtlety of ironic ingenuousness for the coarser irony of a "solemn sneer."

More offensive to good taste than the extended subtlety of *Thaïs* are such bits as *Scolastica* in the *Etui de Nacre*, or the anecdote concerning St. Mary the Egyptian in the *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque*. These are related with all the naïveté of a tenth century monk. Indeed, were the anecdote of St. Mary a faithful translation from one of the numerous old collections of lives of saints which Anatole France knew

so well,—and to all outward appearance it might well be,—it would be received as a token of genuine holiness. But intercalated as it is in the story of the adventures of the Abbé Coignard and his faithful disciple Jacques Tournebroke, it raises a smile at the expense of religion and to the profit of sensuality. A tale which breathes the odor of sanctity becomes a cutting innuendo by being dropped casually, as it were, unpremeditatedly, into uncongenial company: that is the ironist's trick. A not dissimilar effect is produced through incongruity of juxtaposition when the lovers of the *Lys rouge* are impelled as by a mysterious force to parade their guilty amours with delicious horror in sacred places.

In later years the master is more direct and more brutal. In the preface to the *Noces corinthiennes* ¹ he says rightly: "If I had treated pious subjects without piety, I should have been inexcusably false to the sense of harmony." This is a fine aesthetic judgment to which the author of *Thaïs*, the *Ile des Pingouins*, and the *Révolte des Anges* was most conspicuously untrue.

Thaïs with its insidious cunning is far more acceptable, artistically, than the *Anneau d'Améthyste*, in which a long and unsavory intrigue brings about the elevation to the bishopric of an ignoble priest. In *Sur la Pierre blanche*, the theme handled with such elegant suavity in the *Procureur de Judée* is taken up again and treated with such grossness as to appear a tawdry caricature of the earlier masterpiece. Half of the *Ile des Pingouins*, most of the *Révolte des Anges*, and a large part of the *Sept Femmes de la Barbe-Bleue* and of the later volumes of tales, are devoted to an inartistically coarse proof of the impotence of the spirit in its eternal contest with the flesh.

¹ *Poésies*, 127; compare *Vie littéraire*, II, 14.

Anatole France the voluptuary has amply avenged himself. A sensualist he had been called. He readily admitted the charge, and then showed that even the holiest are controlled by that same passion which ruled his life: *Désir, Volupté*. The only difference between them and him is that he willingly acquiesces in the inevitable triumph of flesh over spirit, and they stubbornly, tragically refuse to do so.

His irony, it must be added, is not directed by any means exclusively to the derision of religion. Its objects include as well all the secular activities and ideals of man, the power and beneficence of thought in particular, as I have tried to show earlier in this book. Addressing his disciples through the lips of the Abbé Coignard, France artfully disparages the claims of reason and religion at the same time: "Thinking is a great infirmity. God preserve you from it, Tournebroke, my son, as He has preserved his greatest saints, and the souls which, cherishing them with peculiar predilection, He reserves for glory eternal."¹

4

There can be no doubt that irony is the most artistic form that satire may take. It lies midway between the humorous and the sarcastic, both of which are ordinarily of an appeal so obvious as to demand little collaboration from the reader. Irony is not of the feelings or the passions; it is of the mind; it is humor intellectualized and sarcasm subtilized. High art may be intellectual and subtle to the extent of being appreciable only by the intelligent. But every art which errs by excess of intellectuality and subtlety is doomed to prove esoteric, and, confined to a little clique of initiated, relatively insignificant. Lords of irony are in particular peril. Not

¹ *Opinions de Jérôme Coignard*, 208.

only is the tendency to superintellectuality and supersubtlety a menace to them, but, in addition, they run the risk of all habitual satirists: they are liable to lose their sympathy for their fellow men, a consummation which is fatal to them and to their art.

Lovers of Thackeray have remarked and lamented occasional aberrations of this sort from the narrow path of artistic poise. One of the most delightful of English humorists, perhaps even the greatest of all, he learned to sharpen his humor with irony. At times, seduced by the exhilaration of success in the art of confounding the unwary and flattering the alert, even he indulged somewhat too freely the mood of intellectual superiority to ordinary men, which seems to be the constant snare in the path of the ironist. And, again, out of sympathy with the hopes and fears of the generality of mankind—the fate of inveterate satirists—he occasionally metamorphosed his slender shaft of winged irony, tipped with humor and wit, and made bright by the flash of human sympathy, into a coarser, less admirable weapon that was wantonly cruel.

Thackeray recovered his equilibrium after every lapse. With Anatole France there seem to have been only instants of recovery; in general the movement is definitely downward. We are witnesses to the gradual degeneration of a great artist.

Sylvestre Bonnard, *Thaïs*, and the *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque* will long be counted great literary works. They do not, however, bear the mark of a writer's masterpieces, but of his first important productions. After them, instead of ridding himself of the faults which they show and refining still further their manifest high virtues, as might have been expected, France caresses and cherishes the former until they threaten to possess him utterly. He never ceased to write

with great skill, but more and more he makes sacrifices to the god of irony till he loses his sympathy with humanity, his moderation, his urbanity, and finally descends to the bleakly inartistic sarcasm of the *Ile des Pingouins*.

Horace describes two types of satirists in the famous fourth satire of the first book:

Hic tibi comis et urbanus liberque videtur
(He seems well-bred, urbane, and open);

and—

'laedere gaudes,'
Inquit, 'et hoc studio pravus facis.'
(You delight to wound, and, ignoble fellow,
you do this from sheer love of wounding).

The development from the former to the latter type was perhaps inevitable in the case of Anatole France. Innately of a gentle and tranquil disposition, with a natural leaning toward the Horatian benignity, he allowed himself to be carried more and more into the mood of Swift by the wave of cynical disillusion which swept over the world during the period of his maturity: his skeptical head gradually subdued his sentimental heart.

Sylvestre Bonnard is steeped in an irony of intelligence, informed with sympathy. The themes of the author's later years appear already in this little volume, too mildly, too playfully expressed to enter the realm of high art, but not burdened by the intemperance which increased in violence as he passed from *Sylvestre Bonnard* to *Thaïs*; from *Thaïs* to the *Jardin d'Épicure* and the *Lys rouge*; thence to the *Histoire contemporaine*; from the *Histoire contemporaine* to the *Ile des Pingouins*, the *Dieux ont Soif*, and the *Révolution des Anges*.

Already at the stage of *Sylvestre Bonnard* he knew that

men were mad. In his haste to mail a letter which may mean the possession of a long-sought manuscript, the old man, as he is plunging down the stairs "like a madman," is intercepted by his housekeeper, who has his hat in her hand.

"I am mad, Thérèse," he admits. "But who is not? Quick, give me my hat."

Already he knew that the pace of justice is that of the tortoise: "Thérèse is deaf as a sack of coal and slow as justice." Already he valued passion: "Thérèse is wise . . . and it is precisely because she is wise that I don't listen to her; for despite my calm exterior I have always preferred the extravagance of the passions to the wisdom of indifference." The burden of the following sentence he repeats again and again after *Sylvestre Bonnard*—without the qualifying phrase: "We are on earth to take delight in the beautiful and the good, and to satisfy every one of our desires when they are noble, pious, and generous."¹ The irony of these references to man's folly, to justice, passion, and desire is too mild to be effective: it is nothing but pleasant wit. But when these same subjects are touched in the *Jardin d'Epicure*, the *Lys rouge*, the *Histoire comique*, the *Dieux ont Soif*, they are not more truly effective, for the author, who in *Sylvestre Bonnard* had, for serious philosophy, stopped too far short of the truth, has erred in his later works by occupying a position too far beyond the limits of the truth.

An even more painful vision of degeneration rises to distress the great artist's admirers when in the light of his later work they reread this sentence of *Sylvestre Bonnard*: "There is a certain delicacy, a certain grace of the soul, which an old man would wound if he expatiated complacently on the sentiments of love, even when it is the purest."² In

¹ *Sylvestre Bonnard*, 38, 143, 194, 208.

² *Ibid.*, 16.

the little tale *Scolastica* France rallied the Christian ideal of chastity with a certain disdainful levity. After *Thaïs* the man who could speak with a fineness extreme to the point of prudery of the sentiment of love came to take more and more a Mephistophelean joy in expatiating complacently on the claims of love—especially when it is the impurest. The *Sept Femmes de la Barbe-Bleue* appeared when the author was sixty-five. In it, and still more in other works of the same period, an old man wounded “a certain delicacy, a certain grace of the soul.”¹

There is a touch of prudery in the last passage quoted from *Sylvestre Bonnard*. That prudery, with its root in sentimentality, explains in part the increasing lack of taste in the later books. For excess leads to excess, as action brings reaction. But that the sentimentality of *Sylvestre Bonnard* is preferable to the scurrility of the *Sept Femmes* can hardly be doubted. In any case the former of these books redeems its outstanding fault, while the latter is almost destitute of compensating merit. And surely it was not necessary that the *bonhomie* of *Sylvestre Bonnard* should give way to the licentiousness of the *Sept Femmes* and the acrimonious truculence of the *Ile des Pingouins*. There is a law of the mean which renders excess repugnant and leads to that golden moderation which Anatole France knew so well—theoretically.

¹ “In the eye of old men what you see above all is lubricity,” he is reported as saying in his last years. Brousson, 331. “That nymph,” writes the learned Carlo Aspertini to his friend M. Bergeret, referring to a certain humble girl, “reminds me that the days of love are past, and that it is time for me to cultivate some choice vices. Life would be really too sad if the rosy-colored swarm of goatish thoughts did not come occasionally to console a worthy man’s old age.” *Anneau d’Améthyste*, 242. “Old women are more salacious than young. I found this out from the confession of several Cyprians, from a law-suit, and from the indiscretion of a physician.” From the unfinished “Dialogue on Old Age.” Corday, 96.

I have assumed that the gentle irony of *Sylvestre Bonnard*, some abatement being made because of the sentimentality which accompanies it, and the malicious irony of the *Rôtisserie*, and the veiled, blasphemous irony of *Thaïs* will be preferred from the purely artistic point of view to the cynicism of the *Dieux ont Soif*, the *Révolte des Anges*, and the *Ile des Pingouins*. All of us, except those hopelessly bound by prejudice, love intellectual subtlety, and rejoice in sly jests at the expense of that absurd animal man, his obstinate devotion to outworn codes and institutions, his pride in virtues and faculties which are the sport of his senses. (Let us never forget that if Cleopatra's nose had been a little shorter, the face of the whole world would have been changed). But when the intelligence of a man whom we delight to honor as a master of the greatest of arts is utilized constantly, and with increasing violence, to the sole end of demonstrating the inanity of human effort to snatch some sort of order out of chaos, we are tempted at last to cry

Enough, no more:

'Tis not so sweet now as it was before.

The pity is that Anatole France was not great enough to temper his shrewd and caustic utterance with sympathy and forbearance. But in discontented ages like ours, when the imagination and the fancy have little scope,—so busy is the intelligence with setting things aright,—when faith in God and man is passing, the urbane irony of less troublous times seems impossible, and the satirist becomes the acid moralist—or immoralist—brandishing a sword dipped in gall. And yet, the truly great artist is capable of rising superior to the spirit of his times.

Anatole France is in the main stream of the French re-

alistic tradition, but the "spleen and sour disdain" of his irony is far removed indeed from the manner of Montaigne and Molière, and from the tone of French literature generally. Our English writers, I have suggested, leap over that middle ground which great French satire (that of Montaigne and Molière) claims as its own: from Addison and Lamb to Pope and Swift. Anatole France seems to occupy successively the extreme positions of English satire, and all too seldom to have struck the *juste milieu* of his race.

No levelled malice
Infects one comma in the course I hold,

said one of the greatest ironists of modern times. From that proud boast, justly made, the greatest ironist of the contemporary world is, unfortunately, debarred.

5

The very nature of irony requires that it be employed economically; the slightest excess causes one to "suffer surfeit, cloyment, and revolt," and to rise by reaction in defense of the victim. "He makes excessive use of direct irony," says Goethe of a half-forgotten German satirist. "This rhetorical device should be employed only very sparingly, for in the long run it becomes annoying to the intelligent, and perplexes the dull, while it appeals to the great mass of the middle class, who, though they have not been called upon for the expenditure of any special mental effort, readily seem to themselves more clever than their neighbors." The delicate, whether they be aesthetes or ordinary, more or less enlightened lovers of literature, may be repelled, but many readers who are only superficially elevated above the stage

of those whom Heine and Arnold called Philistines, and whom Goethe and Anatole France include under the contemptuous term *vulgus*, will be charmed without danger of satiety. "The vulgar intellectual palate," says Lowell, "hankers after the titillation of foaming phrase, and thinks nothing good for much that does not go off with a pop like a champagne cork." The phrases of Anatole France softly foam, and then they pop, though usually with a somewhat less violent explosion than a champagne cork. His admirers—those who accord him their unqualified approbation—enjoy the stealthy foaming, and the sudden, sly pop, but they would be offended by nothing more than by the imputation that they belong to the "great mass of the middle class," unless it were by the insinuation that theirs are "vulgar intellectual palates."

Goethe is perhaps right after all. There is something a little bourgeois in the master who by his uninterrupted flow of ironic comment constantly invites us to consider ourselves more clever than our neighbors, without calling upon us for the expenditure of any special mental effort. For the shafts of his irony fall unceasingly and swiftly, like the arrows of Apollo among the ships and tents of the Achaeans. They fall as unerringly and as mercilessly too, each finding a vulnerable spot. It is admirable, this rain of arrows, admirable in its exhaustless fecundity, in its accuracy; but it arouses misgiving, and it wearies after a while. It wearies, amazing though it is, precisely because it is unceasing, and always amazing. Now one page succeeds another, each bristling with ironic points, as in the *Jardin d'Epicure*; again, in the *Procureur de Judée*, for instance, the naïve and ingenuous story-teller leads us unsuspecting and confiding to a termination of overwhelming ironic poignancy. But whether it comes upon us in the form of prick upon prick, or

transfixes us finally with cunningly prepared and cumulative force, the irony is always there.

One is jaded finally; one searches for relief in a volume of straightforward prose, innocent of winged shafts dexterously envenomed.

The primary law of satire is that it must tell the truth. France has attacked all the beliefs, all the codes, all the conventions and usages, all the habits of mind of his day and ours; and it cannot be contended that there is not some truth in all that he says. But there is a secondary law of satire, indissolubly bound to the first and conditioning it, which, I think, he has not sufficiently regarded: satire must not exceed the proper limits on pain of failing in its purpose by inducing us to take the victim's part. Satire should and can tell the truth without undue exaggeration, and without that intensity of bitterness which always leads to the suspicion that the author's conclusions are colored by personal suffering, or even by mere personal pique, or by a naturally irascible and atrabilious disposition. It would have been fortunate if the greatest of English satires had ended before the voyage to the country of the Houyhnhnms. In that last part of *Gulliver* the author rises to a pitch of savagery which no reader can forget, and which for every reader must color even the earlier parts. It is thus too with Anatole France: he so frequently passes beyond the pale of good taste that even his most admirable work is flecked with a dubious tincture by sheer reflection from the production of his more extravagant moods. I think there is no volume since the *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque* in which he has not overshot the mark, thereby inviting our sympathy for the victim. Satire is an effective form of literature; invective is not.

But the world will not listen unless one raises one's voice.

Perhaps not. It may be true that the world will not be much inclined to mend its ways at the bidding of a genial satirist like Montaigne or Molière, however convincing and inescapable his criticism may be; but it is certainly true that, though it may hear him, it will not be led to the sanctuary of wisdom by a satirist who scoffs impatiently, with intolerant and triumphant derision, at human weakness, human effort, and human hope.

6

I have regretted that irony should have in the course of his development become so dominating a quality of Anatole France's manner that it absorbs the reader's attention to the virtual exclusion of all else; that an almost unparalleled virtuosity should be so entirely at the service of a single literary bias; especially when that is one which, if pervasively in evidence, by its very nature attracts notice to itself and inevitably gives a peculiar turn to both the writer's thought and his style.

Jules Lemaître tells us that the fairy Irony visited Renan one day and said to him: "I bring thee a charming gift; but I bring it thee in such abundance that it will encroach upon the domain of all thine other gifts, and warp them. Thou wilt be loved; but no one will ever dare to tell thee his love, for people will always fear to seem fools in thine eyes. Thou wilt make sport of men, of the universe, and of God; thou wilt make sport of thyself, and in the end thou wilt lose all concern for the truth, all taste for it. Thou wilt mingle irony with the gravest thoughts, with the most natural actions, and the best; and irony will render all that thou dost write infinitely seductive, but unsubstantial and fragile."¹

¹ *Contemporains*, I, 213.

This severe indictment, in which the ultimate effect of Renan's work is admirably summed up, is worth rereading and pondering. It is more applicable to France than to his master. And it comes from the pen of a devoted admirer of both Renan and France.

To one who reads France for the first time, or to an old devotee who can by an effort of the will abstract himself from the oppression of a too insistent ironic resourcefulness, the style of the master is a thing of wonder. But France's style, which is prevailingly rich and sensuous, is precisely the kind that is least capable of resisting the influence of constant irony. Ironic excess will affect any style adversely. It is less inimical, however, to a simple style than to a warm, Romantic style like that of France, for the latter is inevitably chilled by the disillusioning note of mockery. And the poetry of a Romantic style demands of the reader a naïve, receptive mood which irony renders impossible by bidding him be ever on his guard lest he be caught in the toils of the scoffer.

Disingenuous artlessness is the distinguishing trait of France's style, as it is also the distinguishing trait of his irony. Apparently simple at times, his style is supremely learned and subtle. It may halt and grope and stumble, as if unable to find the right path—all mere pretense; it always knows whither it is tending. Easy, fluent, casual, at other times, as if it proceeded with unpremeditated candor and unconscious grace from a mind to which all sophistication is foreign, it is the product of perseverance, built up word by word with patience and care. Suave and nonchalant always, it possesses the elasticity and suppleness to adapt itself to varying shades of emotion and thought. It suffices for moods of languorous, sensual lassitude and moments of bitter emphasis; for the secrets of the lady's boudoir and the

grossness of a city's streets; for the first, faint stirrings of a child's consciousness of the complexity of things, and for the involutions of a sophist's lucubrations. Now it is heavy with erudition, almost pedantic, now light, gay, and free, or rough and untutored; now a tissue of subtle nuances, now clear, scintillating, crystal-like. Now it is picturesque, crowded with images, soaring aloft on the wing of fancy; now bare and stark, sober in its monotone, dun and colorless. It suffices always. But there is always lurking in the mind of the reader the suspicion that it is tricking him. One comes to recognize the process. I have quoted the austere opening of *Thaïs*. The story which follows is anything but austere. We have been tricked. And we finally realize that such a passage covers some dark malice which we must look to find beneath the apparent simplicity, on pain of feeling like a simpleton lacking in perspicacity; or that it is preparing some bold heresy. We are not often deceived; though occasionally the author really does deceive us as in those tales of the *Etui de Nacre* which turn out to be ingenuously pious. But we may still suspect that these too are in fact heretical, and that in asserting that they are edifying, we are but exposing our naïveté: "for people will always fear to seem fools in thine eyes."

The reader is so taken up with the delightful task of following the thread of the writer's labyrinthine irony that thought and style alike are finally imbrued in its pigment. France's style, thus tintured, tends to disappear beneath his manner: the terms stylist and ironist become almost convertible. In fact it might be more correct to make not his style but his manner the primary object of study. His manner so impregnates his style that to dissociate the two seems really impossible. His irony, which is the distinctive characteristic of his manner, and is not primarily a matter of

style at all, is so all-absorbing that his style, however varied it may appear to be—and I have paid tribute to the multiplicity of its forms—takes its tone from the pervasive ironic manner, and from many colors becomes one. If we study it in selected extracts, torn from their context, it possesses an astounding multiformity. Run through volume after volume, and all distinctions of style are obliterated by an ironic manner which itself from *Thaïs* to the *Révolte des Anges* remains the same except for a constantly increasing acidity.

France's manner is pleasing to many readers, and they will not perceive, therefore, its encroachment upon what is a higher domain, for to them his manner and his style are equally enchanting. They are pleased by the manner because they are pleased by the personality behind it, for manner differs from style in being the direct and immediate expression of personality. The regret of others, however, at the absorption of Anatole France's style by his manner is prompted by the feeling that, in general, it is always unfortunate when manner controls style, and that, in particular, France's style is admirable, while his manner—even though one share his impatience with the stupidity of man and the tyranny of antiquated concepts—his manner, defined as it is by excessive indulgence of a noble gift, is neither humane nor artistic.

The appeal to posterity has perhaps been overworked. It is uncertain, for what displeases one generation may charm another. It is significant, however, if not decisive. And one may, with some interest, figure to oneself the astonishment of the fine connoisseur of letters some few generations hence when he happens upon the collected works of the author of the *Jardin d'Épicure* and becomes gradually conscious, as he reads, of the disparity between an admirable style, on the

one hand, and, on the other, a manner suited to the expression of a wayward and futile disillusion—not the disillusion of great souls, but the disillusion of Diogenes, who did nothing about it but hold himself aloof in proud disdain, and there did roll his jolly tub, and turn it, tumble it, hurry it, jolt it . . . , as the reader will discover if he turns to the pages of that great scoffer whose disillusion was the disillusion of a great soul, the disillusion of one who was a revolutionary in an age, like ours, of revolutionary changes, but who never lost his urbanity and his sense of humor, except in that last book which no faithful Pantagruelist will admit as authentic.

7

“Let us not torment either sentences or thoughts,” says France in a passage of the *Jardin d’Epicure* which I have already discussed. I left this sentence untouched. It seems appropriate to consider it here. If the *Jardin d’Epicure* is the center of France’s work, and such it appears to be, it can hardly be said that he does not habitually torment his thought. He expresses his ideas most characteristically in the form of the paradox, which is, I suppose, the rhetorical turn expressly invented for the purpose of torturing thought. It is by definition a manner of stating that a thing is true which is either not true or only partially true. The paradox is to thought what irony is to manner, for irony clouds the meaning of a sentence, and paradox complicates thought. If paradox is the distinctive trait of France’s thought, and irony of his manner, and if both are excessively employed, it can safely be said that in a very real sense he torments both his sentences and his thoughts.

I know that Anatole France can write straightforward prose with the stamp of true simplicity, and I could produce

in evidence many such pages; but I am trying in this study to discover what is typical and central in my author; and such passages, while they show what he might have been and might have done, do not express the thoughts, and are not couched in the manner, which have earned him his fame. He is preëminently the great contemporary master of irony and paradox, of the disingenuous, the tortured, in thought and manner. His ideas take the form of paradox, and his ironic manner colors his style: to readers avid of paradox and irony, twin sisters these, often encountered together, Anatole France is a source of endless delight. By those, on the contrary, who take pleasure in paradox and irony only when they are employed sparingly, he can hardly be read without serious misgiving.

France once excellently said—I have already quoted the passage: “Whatever wins its vogue only by some trick of novelty and whim of aesthetic taste ages fast. Fashions change in Art as in everything else.” The legion of his followers value him for his irony and for his paradoxes. Irony and paradox have been fashionable in art for half a century. They are not new, but they had not been widely cultivated for a hundred years when the aesthetes and diletantes made a novelty of them: they became the “rage.” They will cease, probably, to be the “latest thing”—like other fashions. The hour of their passing seems already to have sounded: they are not quite so fashionable as they were a few years ago. Will Anatole France pass with them? Future generations may possibly prove more hospitable to them than those of us who are repelled by their omnipresence, impatient of them because they are so intrusively fashionable, because they have been the conventional mode of our day, because we cannot get away from them. But it is probable that they will never be accept-

able unless they are content to occupy a discreet post of honor, and to appear not too frequently before the public gaze.

8

I tried earlier in this essay to show that France's style is not prevailingly simple, that its virtues lie in other qualities. I have added the further suggestion that an author's style can hardly be simple in any large sense of the word if irony and paradox are the peculiar characteristics of his manner and thought. The ordinary intelligent reader, who must be the final judge of literary excellence, not the peeping and botanizing scholar, will, I think, never mention France's simplicity, for he gets a unified impression of a book, never dissociating matter, manner, and style; and it is only by an unnatural severance of style from manner and matter that one can gain the impression of simplicity in reading *Thaïs* or *Monsieur Bergeret*.

It may be profitable to reconsider the ascription to France of classic virtues other than simplicity, always bearing in mind the fact that there are literary virtues which are not distinctively classic, and that just as his work is distinguished by excellent qualities which are antagonistic to classic simplicity, so it may be possible to find that he substitutes for other classic virtues equivalent or even superior virtues of another sort.

If it is accepted that the dissociation of matter, manner, and style is impossible, that they perpetually react upon one another, then qualities which distinguish markedly one of these three must be noticeable also in the other two. It has been generally agreed, for instance, that lucidity characterizes France's style. But surely, lucidity, like sim-

plicity, is hardly compatible with irony. If a writer's irony is effective and artistic, his style, which, I suppose, so far as clarity is concerned, cannot be considered wholly apart from his meaning, will not be so clear as to invite commendation of its lucidity. On the contrary, it will be only at the price of effort that the intelligent reader will be able to find the truth hidden between the lines; and the unintelligent reader will be routed completely. Such, I think, is the effect of France's elusive manner on the apparent lucidity of his style. As to his thought: is it clear? If it is true, as I think it is, that no one, not even the master himself, could read his works, the *Jardin d'Epicure*, for instance, and discriminate that which is set down in earnest, that which is only half serious, and that which is pure jest, it can certainly not be said that that which is expressed is any clearer than the manner of expressing it; and a style can hardly be remarkable for its lucidity if manner and matter are distinguished by deviousness and uncertainty—unless one can imagine style divorced from what is said and from how what is said is to be understood.

Another classic quality which critics find in unusual degree in France's style is restraint. But when one considers the increasing intemperance of his matter and manner from 1890 on, it would seem more reasonable to remark not on his restraint but on the opposing virtue of abandonment. So too his moderation,¹ in view of the increasing grossness of his expression, and of his lapses from good taste,—the degeneration of his sensuality into lubricity, the sharpening of his irony to sarcasm,—might well be translated into the antithetical virtue of boldness, if we are to have a well-rounded portrait of the artist—to see him entire, as every good reader sees him—and not a trisection of him into de-

¹ See above, pp. 110-113.

tached and amorphous morsels labelled, respectively, style, manner, matter.

The grace and charm and harmony of his style, which constitute his real title to fame, take from the unsavoriness of his themes and the sordidness of his characters an inharmonious tone, like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh. The serenity of his style conforms with the calm of the spectator's detachment. But this placidity gradually disappears during the transformation of the gentle and melancholy humor of *Sylvestre Bonnard* into the vindictive rebellion against God and man and man's works which began before *Thaïs* and reached its apogee in the *Ile des Pingouins*, the *Dieux ont Soif*, and the *Révolte des Anges*. And in proportion as the placidity of the author waned, the urbanity of his manner and the serenity of his style lost all but a superficial appearance of genuineness.

There is, it must be said, something strangely anomalous in the insistence of critics upon the classicism of Anatole France. An age which is about as far removed from the classic spirit as possible rises to acclaim its accredited spokesman, and as its highest meed of praise accords him the title of classicist, rediscoverer of the secret of the age of Pericles, of Augustus, and of the Grand Monarch!

An American reviewer of the English translation of the *Génie latin* quotes from the preface as follows:

"Found no lofty expectations on this title, the Latin Genius; you will find here nothing to justify them. It is an act of faith and of love for that Greek and Latin tradition wherein resides all wisdom and beauty, and without whose pale is naught but error and vexation of spirit. Philosophy, Art, Science, Jurisprudence, all, we owe to Greece, and to her conquerors whom she overcame. The men of old time live on, and teach us yet. . . ."

—quotes this passage with enthusiastic approval, totally unaware, apparently, of the antinomy between the statements contained herein and all, or almost all, that he and his age read and write and believe and say.

The truth is, probably, that it is impossible to separate from one another matter and manner and style; that the age in which we live is delighted by the matter and manner of Anatole France, with their paradox and their irony, which are modern and not classic; ¹ that France's reiterated assertion that he has taken the older writers as his models in the matter of style, and his known admiration of Greece and Rome and the French seventeenth century, an admiration which is certainly unfeigned, have been accepted without inquiry as to whether a classic style is congruous with his version of the modern spirit.

In any case, the grandest of the master's ironies, an unconscious one, and the most piquant of his paradoxes, is his leading the world to accept as classic a style which, in spite of all his efforts to render it classic, was incurably Romantic, a style moreover which was pressed into the service of a very unclassic manner and a very unclassic philosophy of life—a manner and a philosophy which would seem to Sophocles and Virgil and Racine in many respects not merely a perversion but a veritable inversion of their manner and thought. And this ironical paradox acquires new point when one reflects that the awe with which a Romantic writer is mistakenly crowned as a great classicist constitutes a regal tribute paid to the classic ideal by the most unclassic of ages. The gods are smiling on Olympus!

¹ The Sophoclean and Socratic irony have little or nothing to do with that of France, and Plato's paradoxes are negligible in the whole estimate of his work.

CHAPTER III

THE ALEXANDRIAN

1

FRANCE'S fine sensibility and his appreciation of the qualities of classic art set him (and his fellow aesthetes) apart from the age in which he lived, for it seems incontrovertible that the last century and a half, and especially the last seventy-five years, devoted as they have been to scientific advance, to political, social, and economic readjustment, have not had time to be seriously interested in art. In other respects—that is, aside from his love of art in general, and of classic art in particular—he is decidedly a man of his age; and his age is certainly not classic. It is not broadly and soundly critical, it is wrathfully iconoclastic; it has lost faith in God, and is confident of the amelioration of the world by human means, but—apparently all unconscious of the enormous inconsistency, an inconsistency due to its simultaneous allegiance to its skeptical head and its sentimental heart—it retracts that confidence by embracing a large contempt for man and his powers, to the point of tending to accept a pseudo-scientific form of fatalism. Even if all this is accepted as marking a distinct advance on preceding ages, and as philosophically and socially entirely sound, it must be recognized as inconsistent with the classic spirit, of which Anatole France has been hailed as the standard-bearer of modern times.

In speaking of his school days, France tells us: "At that time I had a taste for fine Latin and fine French which I have not yet lost, despite the advice and the example of my more fortunate contemporaries."¹ His style was unquestionably formed by a study of the old writers, and he was, we may be sure, always quite blind to the discoloration of the clear crystal of his classic style by a discordant matter and manner which were the product of the unclassic age in which he lived. And yet I suspect that in the following autobiographical anecdote there is to be read the record of a significant infidelity to the classic ideal.

M. Bergeret, professor of Latin at the university, had been, like Anatole France, during the greater part of his life an ardent admirer of Virgil. "But occasionally his flexible, investigating mind made its escape and permitted itself very independent critical views." In one of these moments of free inquiry, he made a discovery which marked his independence of conventional opinion: he came to the conclusion that the Romans in general and Virgil in particular were terribly rhetorical, tumid, and mediocre. And "as he grew older and his taste changed, he found little in Latin literature to esteem except Catullus and Petronius."²

M. Bergeret deserts Virgil for Catullus and Petronius. "Oh you tellers of the Milesian tales, oh subtle Petronius. . . !" exclaims France. He imagines that he would have loved the Milesian tales if they had not perished, because, doubtless, they were, like the eighteenth century *contes*, malicious and spiced with lasciviousness. They live on in Petronius, who has come down to us and has been greatly appreciated during the last half century.

¹ *Livre de mon Ami*, 152.

² *Mannequin d'Osier*, 60-61; compare 333.

"Oh you tellers of the Milesian tales, oh subtle Petronius, oh my Noël du Faÿl, oh precursors of Jean de la Fontaine! What apostle was wiser and better than you who are commonly treated as unclean? Oh our benefactors! You have taught us the true science of life, a benevolent contempt for mankind!"³

The writers of the Milesian tales, and Petronius and Catullus, are classic, if by classic we mean anything Greek or Roman; Noël du Faÿl and Jean de la Fontaine (the author of the *contes*) are classic, if by classic we mean anything written during the French Renaissance and the seventeenth century. But they are all, in fact, only dwellers on the fringe of the classical world. M. Bergeret deserted Virgil in favor of the tellers of Milesian tales and Catullus and Petronius, who are all Alexandrians. When Jules Lemaître said that France was *l'extrême fleur du génie latin*, he meant that he was the last of the Alexandrians. He did not intend to disparage either Anatole France or Alexandrian literature. He merely acutely pointed out the fact that France was Alexandrian rather than classic in the narrower and more exact sense of the word.

The writers of Alexandria were thoroughgoing "moderns." They prided themselves, as we do to-day, on creating a "new" literature. But they were scholars and poets at the same time. They were as entirely "modern" as Anatole France is, and they had his admiration for the ancients. The result is that they, like him, tried to transport old themes into a "modern" form and to infuse them with the "modern" spirit; or, more often, to set "modern" subjects and "modern" moods in an ancient frame.

Sur des pensers nouveaux faisons des vers antiques—this rule guided him as it had guided them. Even Theocritus wrote about Sicilian shepherds in a style which was not

¹ *Mannequin d'Osier*, 160-161.

untouched by artifice, though his mimes and some of his idylls show that he, who towers above all the writers of his period, alone among them could write unaffectedly. The ordinary Alexandrian style is imitative, though the subject is "new"; Callimachus and Apollonius, learned men, wrote in antique manner on themes drawn from local history and local mythology. Anatole France is a scholar too, as erudite, perhaps, as either of the great Alexandrians.

I have already said that France's "pastiches," his constant imitation of other writers even to the point of plagiarism, his archaism, his artificiality, seemed to me to constitute a charm rather than a blemish in his work. If some of his "pastiches" are objectionable, it is not because they are "pastiches," not because they are borrowed (plagiarism in an Anatole France is a venial fault), but because they are unsuccessful. And the failure is due not only to an excessive preoccupation with style as an end in itself but also, it seems, to the vain effort to put a contemporary view of life into an alien setting. This, I think, happens in the case of most of the ironical tales dealing with the religion of the Middle Ages. His eighteenth century "pastiches," the *Rôtisserie*, for instance, are more satisfactory because the thought and style of the eighteenth century *conte* accord excellently with France's temperament and his philosophy. But in the *Rôtisserie* itself is to be found an example of a "pastiche" which is hardly acceptable, because it has no proper place in an eighteenth century story, has nothing whatever to do with France's own thought or life, is utterly foreign to his plot, and is inserted merely because he had happened to run across a book from which he could borrow some queer and exotic matter that piqued his curiosity, and because he had a temperamental fondness for the grotesque. I refer to all that dull portion of the tale which concerns the crazy d'Astarac. The adventures of

Coignard and Tournebroke might profitably have been disentangled from the thread of that uninteresting person's career: the Abbé and his disciple are sufficient, with the dainty lace-maker and others of their intimates, to hold the stage; they have no need of the mad cabalistic philosopher. A *conte* of Diderot is not improved by the collaboration of Beckford or Ann Radcliffe.

Intellectual and emotional integration of matter, manner, and style is fundamental in classicism, resulting in that impression of oneness and totality which is the distinguishing mark of complete classicists. This sweet concord is apparent in Virgil, though he, the greatest by far of the Roman poets, is in some respects an Alexandrian. He is an Alexandrian particularly in that his art, when compared with Homer's, is largely artifice—in the best sense of the word—and because he is a master of the "pastiche." To point out the fact, therefore, that Anatole France is, like the Alexandrians, imitative, is not to depreciate his artistic power; to add that sometimes he does not succeed in creating a harmony of matter, manner, and style is to indicate that he did not succeed as Virgil did, with trifling exceptions, in this typically Alexandrian artistic procedure.

2

The evidence just adduced of a relationship between Anatole France and the Alexandrians is perhaps incidental and more curious than significant. In four respects, however, the similarity is certainly more important and fully justifies Lemaître's remark.

The first of these, which needs no more than mere mention, is the cult of sensuality which is common to France and to them. The greatest literature of Greece and Rome, the

truly classic literature, is notoriously reticent in regard to the sensual life, neglecting love as a theme, and almost ignoring the sexual impulse in the lives of men. The transcendent, one might almost say exclusive, importance of sex is a discovery of modern men of letters. In nothing do the Alexandrians (the tellers of Milesian tales, Catullus, and Petronius) and we moderns (beginning with the precursors of Jean de la Fontaine) so differ from Homer and Sophocles and Virgil as in the significance which we attach to sensuality. Anatole France is in this matter a true modern, related to the Alexandrians, rather than to the great writers of the age of Pericles and of Augustus and of Louis XIV.

The second similarity is found in the insistent note of effeminacy to which I have already referred. This trait alone, one of the most characteristic of France's temperament and of his art, is sufficient to establish an insurmountable barrier between him and the true classicists. He frequently imitates successfully various ancient styles, but he lacks fatally the virility and fire of classic literature. No man could possess such qualities who had no convictions and believed in nothing except soft pleasures and the flux of all things. France loved sensual subjects, but that uneasy perturbation, akin to sensual excitation, which the sensitive person, and even many others rougher and coarser, feel continually while reading him, proceeds even more perhaps from his style than from his subject. There is something disquieting in the seductive charm of his style. This "master of literary voluptuousness," as French critics agree in calling him, some encomiastically, some deprecatingly, lacks the force and manly vigor which would redeem a wondrously lovely grace of movement, diverse and undulating, with all the elegant sorcery of exquisite femininity, melodiously adorned with suggestive words and phrases of dubious con-

notation; lithe, sinuous, caressing, sensual; not infrequently rousing at the same time delight and alarmed suspicion; indescribably enticing always. Hazlitt somewhere quotes a passage from Donne containing the phrase, "my words' masculine persuasive force." France is infinitely more persuasive than the old doctor; but his persuasion is feminine.

Sensuality and lack of virility: these are significant points of contact between France and the Alexandrians. Perhaps it is unjust, I feel bound to add, to attribute lack of virility to all the Alexandrians indiscriminately; but the age as a whole may surely be thus characterized. We are reminded of Anatole France again when we come to the record of the satirists of the Alexandrian period. The spirit of the times was prosaic and commercialized. A new bourgeois class had emerged, which demanded that artists take cognizance of its existence. Social satire naturally flourished. The influence of the Cynic philosophy was strong, dictating the paradoxes wherewith the ordinarily accepted values were derided, and prescribing the tone of stinging scorn with which all social conditions and conventions were assailed—by Menippus, for instance. Such satirists as this master of Lucian or as Anatole France are the inevitable product of an age like the Alexandrian or our own. France is Alexandrian, be it said, in part because his age is Alexandrian—an age of criticism and doubt and effeminacy; a decadent age; the end of a great period or the preparation for a great one; an age in which literature is dissatisfied with all that has gone before, and has not yet found substitutes; an age in which man is dissatisfied with all previously existing ideals and has not yet found new ones, and is prone to say, as Anatole France does, that new ones never will be found.

A fourth, and still more important sign of relationship between France and the Alexandrians, I have already alluded to: his cult of expression and his neglect of structure. I am going to take up this matter again in the effort to show that the subordination of structure to style by France and the Alexandrians is not fortuitous: it is the natural result of reliance upon the type of imagination which he and they assiduously cultivated.

The most characteristic production of the Alexandrian age was the idyll. The name itself, which means "little picture," is significant, for it shows the influence on literary art of the realistic, or naturalistic, *genre* painting then in vogue, and recalls Horace's unfortunate *ut pictura poesis*. The idyllic, or pictorial, imagination which ruled in Alexandria is far removed from the creative, architectural, generalizing imagination of Athens. The pictorial imagination naturally delights in restricted subjects (such as form the themes of idylls and epigrams), or in the parts of a larger whole, making of them self-centered entities. The creative imagination works upon a larger canvas, and concerns itself with structure, with the work of art as a whole, subduing all parts, rendering them complete in themselves, but intelligible and significant only in so far as they contribute to the effect of the whole. Classic art is not by any means inattentive to details whether of style or matter; but particularities of style and matter are subordinated to the general design.

It is the pictorial imagination that France has in mind when he speaks of "that pretty imagination of detail and of style which embellishes life."¹

And again he refers to this type of imagination with eager

¹ *Livre de mon Ami*, 194.

appreciation of its excellence in speaking of his mother: "‘I have no imagination,’ said mama. She said she had none because she believed that imagination meant the writing of novels, and she was not aware that she had a rare and charming kind of imagination which did not express itself in sentences. Mama was a housewife, entirely occupied by domestic cares. She had an imagination which gave life and color to her humble home. She had the gift of making the pot and the skillet live and talk, the knife and fork too, the dishrag and the iron; she was an ingenuous story-teller, endowed by nature. She told me stories to amuse me, and as she felt herself incapable of imagining anything, she based them on the pictures which I had.”¹

In these two passages Anatole France has described his own imagination: it is "that imagination of detail and of style which embellishes life," and it is based on the pictures which he had stored in his memory.

He read untiringly, and he apparently never forgot. It is years since he has read a certain book. "And yet," he says, "I can quote from memory, without fear of error, a whole sentence from it." Here is the sentence, evidence by its length of the tenacity of his memory, and by its nature of the kind of passage with which he stored it: passages whose excellence resides in the sensuous suggestiveness of an image, and in the magic of phraseology:

"Le ciel ressemble à une feuille de rose. C'est le dernier pétale du jour qui s'effeuille, du jour qui tombe dans le passé, mais dont notre esprit gardera le souvenir, comme d'un jour de joie et de paix, le dernier peut-être."²

Even more remarkable than his recollection of things read was his power of recalling things seen.

¹ *Pierre Nozière*, 43.

² *Vie littéraire*, IV, 137.

"M. Bergeret," he says, "was not destitute of that faculty which is called visual memory. Without having an eye rich in memories, like the painter who stores enormous, innumerable pictures in a fold of his brain, he called to mind without a great deal of effort and with a fair degree of fidelity scenes which had long since attracted his interest. He preserved carefully in the album of his memory the outline of a beautiful tree or of a graceful woman which had once imprinted itself on the pupil of his eye. But never had a mental image appeared to him so clear, so precise, so completely in its natural colors—at the same time circumstantial and strong, full, compact, solid, powerful—as . . ." ¹

Anatole France had indeed the power to call past scenes to mind, and the adjectives of the last sentence describe the completeness with which he recovered them. It is thus that his amazing pictorial imagination as an artist was nourished and reinforced.

"If a writer possesses the emotional in addition to the visual memory," says Rémy de Gourmont, "if he has the power while evoking a material scene to restore in himself the exact emotional state which that scene roused in him, he is in possession (even if he is ignorant) of the whole art of writing." ²

One may demur to the last phrase, for surely it cannot be that the whole art of writing is a matter of memory, and Gourmont elsewhere corrects himself; but there can be no doubt that an imagination such as that of France which is based on a rich visual and emotional memory is a fruitful aid in the art of writing.

When he tells us, therefore, as he does frequently, that he is "totally lacking in imagination" ³ we must dissent. What he means is that he does not possess that other type of imagination which is truly creative. And since he does not

¹ *Mannequin d'Osier*, 121-122. I have not completed the sentence. As Matthew Arnold says: "Mr. Pepper must go on; I cannot."

² *Problème du Style*, 35.

³ *Sylvestre Bonnard*, 109, 113, etc.

possess it, he is naturally inclined to believe that it does not exist, just as we all are disposed to doubt the reality of faculties and senses of which we can find no trace within ourselves. "It is in fact impossible," he says, "to invent anything." The sentence following is significant in view of the distinction just made between two types of imagination, and of the opinion expressed that France possesses only one of them. "All our imagination is made up of memories."¹

The pictorial imagination does not create: it brings scenes together and compares them. "The imagination assembles and compares, it never creates," says France in one of his later books,² and still more recently he described again, with some complacency, his literary method and the rôle of that imagination which plays upon such an ample store of memories: "I require as many as eight proofs. What can I do about it? I am lacking in imagination but not in patience. My most precious tools are scissors and paste."³

The imagination which France describes, and which he possesses so abundantly, is the pictorial imagination of the Alexandrian age, of most of the Romanticists, and of the modern world generally. That other imagination, which generalizes and creates, is the classic imagination. Arnold calls it "the imaginative reason"; Lowell, "the reason that shapes," "the shaping imagination," "the faculty that shapes, gives unity of design, and balanced gravitation of parts." The pictorial imagination delights in images and scenes; it abandons itself eagerly and wholly to an impression whether remembered or fictitious; it paints little pictures of wonder-

¹ *Vie littéraire*, II, 39; compare: "I say that my memory is very bad. I do not wish to be misunderstood: most of the images that it has received, it loses entirely; but the few which remain are very clear, and my memory is a brilliant museum." *Vie en Fleur*, 345.

² *Ile des Pingouins*, 39; compare *Jardin d'Épicure*, 113: "Man has the genius of imitation; he hardly invents."

³ Brousson, 78.

ful grace and vividness, and clothes them in all the sorcery of enchanting expression. It is "that imagination of detail and of style which embellishes life." It concerns itself with the component parts of a work of art and is regardless of the total effect. It occupies itself with style, not with design or composition, except in so far as these are utilized in the organization of the parts as separate wholes. It produces a series of brilliant and beautiful "idylls" and images loosely united by a tenuous and unimportant thread of story.

It is very different from that imagination which is devoted to the creation of a rounded and articulate whole by correlating the parts in accordance with the dictates of order and proportion; by subduing the material to itself instead of seeking, as does the pictorial imagination, to abandon itself to the poignant seduction of sensuous receptivity; by being master instead of servant of the material; by eliminating ruthlessly all irrelevancies, however engaging they may be in themselves; by holding always to one aim: the creation of a living organic work. This is the imagination which Coleridge extolled, which Goethe refers to constantly, the technical operation of which Pater has excellently described in a famous passage:

"The otiose, the facile, surplusage: why are these abhorrent to the true literary artist, except because, in literary as in all other art, structure is all-important, felt, or painfully missed everywhere?—that architectural conception of work, which foresees the end in the beginning and never loses sight of it, and in every part is conscious of all the rest, till the last sentence does but, with undiminished vigor, unfold and justify the first—a condition of literary art, which, in contradistinction to another quality of the artist himself, to be spoken of later, I shall call the necessity of *Mind* in style."

France's mother was partly wrong when she "believed that imagination meant the writing of novels," for she and her

son were endowed with another, precious sort of imagination, which she utilized in telling him stories "based on the pictures" which he had. The imagination which meant the "writing of novels," her son did not have at his command. With prophetic insight he says in *Sylvestre Bonnard*:¹ "I am a very bad teller of tales [he is maligning himself here: he is a successful, even fascinating, teller of tales], and if the impossible should happen and I should take it into my head to compose a novel, I should not be likely to succeed."

The impossible did happen: he did take it into his head to write novels, all of which are seriously disfigured by the defect of which he showed himself to be aware—the inability to "compose." Take one of his novels to pieces and read each portion separately: a rare treat; consider the novel as a whole, seek in it an organic, living reality, and you are dismayed by an impression of utter confusion. Very few of them have a plot. There is perhaps a plot in the *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque* as clearly as there is one in *Gil Blas* or in Rabelais's great work, but no more clearly; there is a semblance of story in *Thaïs*, in the volumes of the *Histoire contemporaine*, and even in the *Ile des Pingouins*, the *Révolte des Anges*, and the *Dieux ont Soif*, but in all these instances it is submerged more or less completely by digressions such as the banquet in *Thaïs*, by political and religious discussions and disquisitions, and by pictures of life in a bygone epoch. The *Lys rouge* is only superficially more carefully constructed. The fact is that France has never attempted to write a novel. His special fields are, first, the tale, a literary form excellently adapted to a writer who delights in clear-cut episodes; second, autobiographical reminiscences, of which he has published five volumes: *Sylvestre Bonnard*, the *Livre de mon Ami*, *Pierre Nozière*, the *Petit*

¹ P. 161.

Pierre, the *Vie en Fleur*; and, finally, philosophical thoughts, notes, and dialogues. To this last class belong the *Opinions de Jérôme Coignard* and the *Jardin d'Epicure*, and why not also the *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque*, for the first two of these books are plainly made up of chips for which the author could not manage to find a place in the last named, an appendix, as it were, which might bear the title "More of the same; a supplement of words and phrases and thoughts"? Remove the characters and the insignificant plot from the last and you have one of the first; insert some names and a local habitation in one of the first and you have the last. I am exaggerating a little, but only a little. And all the other works named above, except perhaps *Thaïs* and the *Lys rouge*, would lose little of their value—they might even gain, in some respects—if they were considered not as novels but as philosophical dialogues set in appropriate surroundings. Even in the case of *Thaïs* and the *Lys rouge*, though the reader may be interested in the stories, the author is not: they are to him convenient means of discussing ideas and describing scenes. These books are not novels at all if by a novel we mean a carefully organized presentation of some large section of human life.

To declare that the *Rôtisserie* is not a novel because it is loosely constructed is not to condemn it as literature. Though many novels of far superior composition have been written within the last decade or two, few of them could be preferred as literary productions to *Sylvestre Bonnard* and the *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque*. Is it not true, however, that these two masterpieces of France would have gained if, while retaining the virtues they possess, they had the added advantage to be found in careful construction? The significance of good composition (in the French sense of

organic structure), France thinks, has been 'ridiculously overemphasized:

"The great writers, you say, have the merit of composition. . . . I know that composition passes ordinarily as the first necessity of the art of writing. That is one of the fundamental truths which our sage University teaches its nurslings as sacrosanct dogmas. . . . But in the case of many geniuses we notice nothing of the sort. Rabelais, Cervantes, Swift worried themselves very little about 'composing' their novels. It is only too evident that Master Alcofribas knew not at all whither he was going. When he began his *Pantagruel*, certainly he did not know exactly what he would put into it. The episodes followed without any order, and all are exquisite. What more is needed? It is a capricious and divine promenade. . . . The most beautiful masterpieces are *à tiroirs*. You slip into a drawer whatever you like. They grow large, swell, distend as you go on." ¹

Then he relates how in the printing of one of his novels serially the compositor by mistake confused the order of the chapters so that the novel "had no longer either head or tail. But no one noticed it," and some acute spirits even complimented the author on "the delicate meanderings of [his] imagination." ²

¹ Reported by Gsell, 119-120.

² *Socrates*. Then as to the other topics—are not they thrown down anyhow? Is there any principle in them? Why should the next topic follow next in order, or any other topic? I cannot help fancying in my ignorance that he wrote off boldly just what came into his head, but I dare say that you would recognize a rhetorical necessity in the succession of the several parts of the composition?

Phaedrus. You have too good an opinion of me if you think that I have any such insight into his principles of composition.

Socrates. At any rate, you will allow that every discourse ought to be a living creature, having a body of its own and a head and feet; there should be a middle, beginning, and end, adapted to one another and to the whole?

Phaedrus. Certainly.

Socrates. Can this be said of the discourse of Lysias? See whether you can find any more connexion in his words than in the epitaph which

All this sounds a little absurd. We infer from other sources, however, and from the nature of his works, that M. Gsell's master has been quoted here with substantial correctness: he is not interested in composition. One of the reasons for his lack of interest, I have called attention to already—his intellectual indolence. Every novelist and every dramatist knows that the organization of material exacts a more severe mental strain than any other step in the creation of a literary work.

But France recognizes the importance of that quality which justifies all the effort of centuries to impress upon the world the desirability of composition—the quality of unity; for, master of paradox that he is, he appends the following to his tirade against that “first necessity of the art of writing” which is “one of the fundamental truths that our sage University teaches its nurslings as sacrosanct dogmas”: “It must be said that there is to be recognized in their works [those of Rabelais and the rest] a unity far more robust than that of an intrigue adroitly handled. It is the coherence of their spirit. The episodes are disconnected; but the thought which plays upon them is always straight and firm.”

France here touches an important point. Structural unity is but the technical and external manifestation of that complete view of life which masters attain by virtue of their

is said by some to have been inscribed on the grave of Midas the Phrygian.

Phaedrus. What is there remarkable in the epitaph?

Socrates. It is as follows:—

‘I am a maiden of bronze and lie on the tomb of Midas:
So long as water flows and tall trees grow,
So long here on this spot by his sad tomb abiding,
I shall declare to passers-by that Midas sleeps below.’

Now in this rhyme whether a line comes first or comes last, as you will perceive, makes no difference.

Plato, *Phaedrus*, 264 (Jowett).

possession of the imagination which sees the world of man in its entirety. Structural unity is certainly important, but the inner unity, which Rabelais, and certainly Cervantes, possesses, and which brings us to condone the absence of the outer unity of structure, is of far more vital significance. France refers vaguely to some elements of this inner unity in speaking of the "coherence of their spirit," but he did not at all understand that the question is not one of a "thought" which is "straight and firm," but of a kind of imagination the very existence of which he denies. *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* and *Don Quixote* are immortal because of the scope and soundness of their authors' imaginative view of life. And yet even they would probably gain if, in addition to their inner unity, they possessed a little more of that other unity of design which most adequately gives external form to the visions of the creative imagination. France has neither the inner unity of spirit nor the outer unity of structure, neither the essential creative imagination nor its external sign.

Furthermore, though most of his works have not the stuff of a novel,—*Sylvestre Bonnard* and the *Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque*, for instance,—and are in general of the same genre with *Gargantua* and *Don Quixote*, in which the story is insignificant, serving merely as a convenient setting for ideas, and therefore pardonably somewhat formless, *Thaïs*, the *Lys rouge*, and the *Histoire comique*, at least, demand a carefully organized plot. Every reader must feel in these three a disturbing incoherence which proves the value of attention to composition, and shows the danger of reliance upon the theory of a "unity far more robust than that of an intrigue adroitly handled." Coherence is exactly the quality Anatole France lacks, not merely the technical coherence of composition but the intrinsic coherence of a

view of life. One who sees life as a spectacle, and not as a process, and one whose world is definitely ego-centric, can not see life profoundly, imaginatively.

France invented his theory in an effort to justify his temperamental deficiency and his practise.

4

"Bonnard," said France to himself one day, "you know how to decipher old texts, but you don't know how to read in the book of life."¹ The great classic writers never read anything like the number of books that passed before the eyes of Anatole France; but in that particular book in which France declares he could not read, they read incessantly—the book of life. They studied the world of man and thing. Their art is—to use the jargon of scholasticism—objective. France does himself injustice; he did indeed know how to read at least one of the sections of the book of life—the one devoted to himself, and the world is enriched by several volumes of charming autobiography. But he never escaped from himself, and it is doubtful if any self-conscious, subjective writer, even one endowed with the artistic sensibility of France, can possess the dramatic sense on a wide scale. The power of observation and analysis and synthesis comes, it would appear, only to those who look outward as well as inward; they only can see life in perspective; they only can paint in large, powerful strokes; they only have that imagination which shapes and organizes and constructs.

France has left us five volumes of autobiography, the first published when he was still young, the last in his old age, a significant sign that he was always self-centered, that his mind was always occupied with itself. It may be said with

¹ *Sylvestre Bonnard*, 93.

a shadow of truth that every man's work is to some degree autobiographical, however objective it may seem, but the personal self which appears almost not at all in the plays of Sophocles and Shakespeare is insistently present in France's work. His volumes which are incontestably autobiographical are hardly more clearly records of his own thoughts and emotions than those which seem fictitious. *Thaïs* and *Laeta Acilia* describe his attitude to Christian chastity; *Jean Servien* (which might well be added to the list of outright autobiographies), the *Lys rouge*, and the *Histoire comique* chronicle the effects of his personal master passion; the *Histoire contemporaine*, the *Ile des Pingouins*, and the later novels are polemics expressing his particular political and religious philosophy in a manner which is peculiarly his own.

France is an autobiographical philosopher, and as such he could see no reason why he should try to view the world objectively, to construct life (as opposed to his own individual life) dramatically, representatively. He does not pretend to be giving us any other than his own life. All the thoughts in all his books are his own thoughts: he does not see the utility of trying to get into another person's skin and think another person's thoughts; all the emotions of his principal characters are his own emotions; all his principal characters—monk, courtesan, revolutionary, physician, artist—are himself. Or where thoughts, emotions, and characters are antagonistic to himself and to his thoughts, they are introduced merely that they may be corrected in accordance with his individual judgment. Just as in his criticism he "recounts the adventures of his soul among masterpieces," and does not aim to get an impartial view of the authors whom he considers, but sets out to "talk of himself apropos of

Shakespeare, or Racine, or Pascal, or Goethe,"¹ so, not only in *Sylvestre Bonnard* and the *Jardin d'Epicure*, but also in volumes which deal with subjects ostensibly imaginary, he talks of himself apropos of Thaïs and Jérôme Coignard and the Bergeret circle and the theatre folk of the *Histoire comique*. A young American disciple of France unintentionally caricatures the attitude of the master in the following words: "A literary creator . . . must look upon creation as the egotistic, unscrupulous branding of oneself upon human beings and episodes."

The artistic temperament and the artistic code set forth in the preceding pages (the pictorial imagination acting on a fund of personal experience) are not peculiar to Anatole France; they held sway during the greater part of the nineteenth century, and they control the twentieth. They have produced great literary works besides those of France, and will continue to do so. But they are at the opposite pole from the impersonal, disinterested art of classicism.

I have said that France understood the theory of classic art. He describes and extols the virtues of simplicity, lucidity, moderation, serenity, urbanity, and he attributes his possession of them to his imitation of the old masters. Of course he is not entirely consistent; and if throughout this study I have seemed to present too consistent a picture, it is, as I have said, because I am disregarding what seem to me temporary and inconsequential variations in favor of those traits and opinions which seem to me central. France's depreciation of the importance of composition, for instance, is fundamental with him. And yet in the following extract from a discourse pronounced in honor of Renan, to a reaffirmation of his homage to other qualities of Greek art

¹ *Vie littéraire*, I, iii-iv.

he tacitly adds a eulogy of composition, that principle which, when it implies the antecedent organization of life by virtue of the creative imagination, is the seal and signature, the vexillum, of classicism—precisely the principle which elsewhere he constantly defies in both theory and practise:

“There never will be found a sufficiently simple expression to do justice to the art of Renan, which is simplicity itself. He trusted eloquence, and detested rhetoric. His fluid style is less in the manner of the Latins than in that of the Greeks, which is much more delicate and hardly admits of imitation. Like the Greeks, he always avoided tumidity and declamation. He has *put art in all his books, since in all he has put order, and has always fitted the manner of writing to the subject, and always subordinated the detail to the whole.*”

It would be difficult to define the classic ideal of structure more succinctly. But immediately on the heels of this tribute to an essential doctrine of ancient art follow two sentences which unsay all, and carry us out of Greece, out of Alexandria even, out of Rome, and the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, and the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, into the heart of Romanticism:

“But the place where his art shows itself with most charm, accessible to all, and precious to the connoisseur, is in the *Souvenirs d'Enfance*, which shines in his work like the golden flower on the rocks of his Brittany. Of all his books it is the most lovable, since *it is the one into which he has put most of himself.*”¹

In this opinion of France tribute is paid to the subjective note which to the nineteenth century is sufficient compensation for the absence of all else.² In the one word “lovable”

¹ *Vers les Temps meilleurs*, II, 48. The italics are mine.

² France recognized theoretically the superiority of the impersonal seventeenth century to the subjective nineteenth century. See Ségur, 115 ff.

(*aimable*) is concentrated the effeminateness which is alien to all art other than the modern, and is especially characteristic of Anatole France. Of all the long array of volumes which bear the name of Renan, that thin sheaf of leaves is the "golden flower," not because it is written "less in the manner of the Latins than in that of the Greeks," and possesses the virtues of Greek art, but because it is the most *aimable*, and it is the one into which the author "has put most of himself."

No Greek, no true classicist, would ever extol the choicest production of a great artist as *aimable*; nor would he prize above all other works of a writer of genius that one "into which he has put most of himself." The first of these eulogies would sound to him like an accusation of effeminacy; the second would seem too much like the praise of the "egotistic, unscrupulous branding of oneself upon human beings and episodes."

5

It is surprising that a writer whose genius is so clearly subjective as that of France should be sometimes classed with the realists, for however types of realist may vary, they have at least this in common, that they strive to achieve an objective point of view. France was frankly hostile to the realistic method. "Art consists in 'arrangement' and one may even say it consists in that exclusively," he says, in the course of an essay in which he opposes the idealism of Feuilleton to the realism of Flaubert and the naturalism of Zola.¹ Flaubert, he is sure, was pitifully in error when he declared that art must present slices of life. Art consists in "arrange-

¹ *Vie littéraire*, III, 373. Compare: "There is not much art in these stories, but a little has slipped in perhaps; and art means 'arrangement,' dissimulation, lies." *Vie en Fleur*, 348.

ment." Of course a good "arrangement" is concealed so as to give the appearance of nature itself. "But nature—and Flaubert failed to observe this—nature and things are conceivable to us only as a result of the 'arrangement' we make of them." The quarrel as to whether the idealist or the realist more accurately reproduces life will never end. As for France, it is clear that he belongs in theory rather in the camp of the former than of the latter. By temperament and by practise too, as well as in theory, he is rather an idealist than a realist, for his "arrangement" is not objective: the only section of the book of life he knew how to read was the one which related his own story.

He is not a realist like Flaubert or Zola; nor is he such a realist as Sophocles or Shakespeare. He does not, like the last two, attempt to discover life in its large, significant outlines. But he does see the immediate object with a clarity that is truly remarkable. So the life of an ancient family, or of eighteenth century Paris, or of a late nineteenth century provincial town, or of the purlieu of a Parisian theatre, is made to stand before us with strangely vivid verisimilitude. This result is attained, however, not so much by the method of Balzac or Flaubert or Zola, by an accumulation of particulars, as by an uncanny way he has of suggesting "atmosphere."

His imagination works with concrete details. He catches the outer form, the movement, of people and things: "Mademoiselle Préfère walked without raising her feet, and talked without moving her lips."¹ Even an abstract idea readily becomes a concrete image; witness the famous wheel of the *Humaine Tragédie*, or this, already quoted: "A good style, in fact, is like yonder beam of light that shines in at my window as I write, and which owes its pure brilliancy to

¹ *Sylvestre Bonnard*, 178.

the intimate combination of the seven colors of which it is made up. A simple style is like white light.”¹

His whole past life decomposes itself into incidents dating from all the periods of his existence, even from his earliest childhood: every light and shade in the past experience is clear before his mind; and with astounding exactness he sets before us the experiences so readily recalled. He easily transfers this power of evocation to purely imaginary scenes, and even there sees and reproduces with startling accuracy down to the most minute distinctions of sense perception. The immediate sensuous response of the sensitive reader is not surprising in view of the master's intoxicated delight in giving himself up without reserve to the reception of impressions, and in view of the magic of that touch which makes a scene live with all the plenitude of external life.

And yet they hardly live, the men and women who pass through those medieval streets, or gather in that eighteenth century bakeshop, or attend the funeral of a poor Parisian player; certainly they do not live with the robust life of Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina. They have almost the appearance of walking abstractions, and that, in some sense, they are, for the master's story is always overfreighted with his thought, and his characters, forced to bear the burden of his ideas, have hardly the strength to live in addition their own independent lives. The one conspicuous exception is Jérôme Coignard, the only truly living being created by France. But even he suffers from his creator's constant preoccupation with himself. Not infrequently he and his worthy disciple struggle to get up on their feet and continue their lives as mortal men, only to be charmed into immobility in order that a late nineteenth century Voltaire may speak unhindered through their lips; or they are transported out of

¹ *Jardin d'Épiqueure*, 107.

their native sphere, which they adorned with such satisfaction to themselves and to those who love them, into the utterly preposterous region of cabalistics and salamanders. Poor Coignard! Poor Jacques! You are such good company when you are yourselves. You are such *nigauds* when you go through the motions as your master pulls the strings.

So it is to a far greater degree with Thaïs and Paphnuce and the rest. Now and then they appear to us in all the fullness of natural life; but much more often, even usually, we see them through a screen, simulacra of living things, so life-like and yet unsubstantial, not very different from that bewitching fairy who appeared to old Bonnard while he slept with the window open—an old folio cosmography of Munster spread before him—and caught a cold which was sure to bring down upon him the thundering objurgations of Thérèse.

Like Bonnard, France knew how to decipher old texts, but in the book of life he did not know how to read. The inwardness of life escapes him entirely. Relying upon his memory and gifted with an imagination which builds only on the pictures he has seen, he plays about the surface of things, not even suspecting the mysteries which lie beneath. Insight is more than sight; and France has only sight. Not one real human being in his habit as he lived does he present us, with the exception of Coignard. Creatures who think the thoughts of their creator (how could they think their own since they do not live?) appear before us—think his thoughts, and pass through a factitious existence in which dialectic and sensuality alone have a place. There are some things in life profounder than dialectic and sensuality—sterner, manlier emotions, enthusiasms, sympathies. Even Bergeret is a futile phantom, observing the fleeting accidents of life, and arguing about them with himself and others, especially with Riquet. Riquet is a dog.

The world of thought in the white light of skeptical intelligence; the filmy land of dreams, evoked in meditation and reverie: these are France's realms. His mind overleaps the interval in which lies what the ordinary human being knows as life, the life of emotions, sympathies, enthusiasms: of all these he finds room only for sensuality. Of the work of the world, of man living and acting in the world, struggling and succeeding and failing, he has nothing to say: his characters are off on a perpetual holiday.

France fails to build human beings with a full complement of passions, not restricted to one alone—with energy and resolution, determined to play a rôle in the world, beings good or bad, but at any rate alive; and he is unable to fit mind to body, and characters to scenes, and to subdue all to a dominating tone and motif. He is a lapidary, not an architect. To erect a framework and adhere to it, is repugnant to his nature, which refuses to be a slave to the restricting exactions of a predetermined form. The tragedies of classic art are not mosaics contrived by fitting together polished fragments, nor are any great works of art, tragedies or novels. France published several of his novels piecemeal in Paris journals. As they appeared, they produced not so much the impression of a serial novel as of a series of loosely related stories and essays. He prefers the eighteenth century tale to the lordly works of the great masters: he loves the irony of its hidden heresies; he loves its voluptuousness; he loves its freedom; he loves its brevity.

“Discreetly tucked away in a corner of M. Bergeret's study, but of easy access . . . , were all the old French masters of the tale, whom he considered to be better adapted to humanity than the more sublime authors.”¹

¹ *Anneau d'Améthyste*, 182; compare *Mannequin d'Osier*, 160–161, quoted above, p. 260.

His joy is to loiter leisurely about his subject, dallying amorously with a phrase, an idea, a sentiment, a character, giving rein to his discursive fancy, throwing in pell-mell anecdotes and digressions drawn from a curiously-stocked storehouse of erudition, piquant sallies, reveries. He is a child of the eighteenth century, which is, like him, "neo-Greek, didactic, encyclopedic, erotic, romantic, impressionable, sentimental, tolerant, atheistic, *Feuillant*." ¹ "What a century," he says, "the eighteenth! The boldest, the most amiable, the greatest." ² To conceive a noble subject, to live with it, to see it finally in its full significance, clear, unmixed, with all the impressiveness that belongs to naked grandeur unhampered by superfluities—this is the ideal of the great writer of tragedies and of novels, an ideal never glimpsed by Anatole France. He prefers to saunter by the wayside, to desert the highway and wander in the bypaths, to stop at all the inns: he never arrives at the end of his journey unless it is a very short one:

"In how much better taste is the tale or the novelette than the novel! Is it not a more delicate medium, more discreet, surer to please people of intelligence, whose life is busy and who know the value of time? The first politeness of the writer, is it not that he be brief?" ³

We owe the preservation of hundreds of fragments of the ancient literatures to their quotability, to the fact that they rose out of their context and shone with exceptional lustre. But the ancients were less interested in striking passages than in whole works; otherwise nothing would remain from them to-day, perhaps, but collections of fragments. One cannot make up a very good anthology by culling blossoms

¹ *Vie littéraire*, II, 231.

² *Ibid.*, 236.

³ *Ibid.*, IV, 319-320; compare *ibid.*, II, 198.

from the Greek tragic poets. An excellent one might be gathered from the gardens of Anatole France. Its excellence will be of one tone, however, since the flowers will be all, or almost all, of one color and one form and one odor. He is at his best in his "idylls," his little pictures. He is a master of the art of moulding plastic phrases into ravishing shapes, of pouring liquid syllables into golden matrices. It is a temptation hard to resist to seclude them all in a cabinet reserved for precious cameos and *objets d'art*.

We might garner too in our cabinet adorned with choicest mother-of-pearl a store of figurines which may readily be detached from their niches: that tattered visionary, that quaint bibliophile, that jolly, unkempt priest, that solitary scholar—but we should need several images of the scholar, for the master modelled him in various forms. Delightful figurines these, true to life, too, though you would hardly say they live, and you might suspect that the imp of perverseness who dwells in the body of the master was guiding his hand when by this stroke and that the portrait became something a little too much like a caricature.

This modeller of precious shapes is the successor of the authors of the Anthology and of the creators of the "idylls" of Alexandria; of Petronius and the predecessors of Jean de la Fontaine. He "arranges" life in accordance with his own particular whimsies; he has none of that imagination which, with the insight of genius, sees into the life of men acting in the world of reality; nor has he that gift of design which might lend fitting form to the vision.

The imagination which is architectonic in that it blends and fuses parts to produce the unity of a whole is not an accidental and unimportant possession of occasional writers; nor is it a mere fetish of classically-minded critics; it re-

sponds to a deeply-rooted demand of man for something more than a brilliant phantasmagoria of purple patches and star dust, for a view of life which shall be, within its limits, rounded and complete, for something to attach the mind to and ponder on.¹ We ask the artist to organize experience for us. We ask him for a concatenated whole; and Anatole France gives us, in place of this, luminous fragments, a charming style. If we scruple at the substitution, he replies: "What would you have? There is no unifying principle or force, there is therefore no whole: there are only parts." But we may still wonder whether the imagination which is not "that pretty imagination of detail and style which embellishes life," but rather the comprehensive imagination which sees life steadily and whole, might not enable us also to see life a little more steadily and a little more whole, by selecting the significant out of the flotsam and jetsam riding on the flux of heterogeneous phenomena, and by creating for us out of this, through force of mysterious intuition and insight, something like reason and order where the author of the *Jardin d'Epicure* sees only chaos.

¹ "Note well," says France himself, "that it is never by exactness of details that the artist secures verisimilitude in the whole. It is, on the contrary, by an accurate survey of the whole, seen from a height, that he arrives at an exact understanding of the parts. *The reason for this is easily conceived. It is that we are so made, all of us, that we truly understand and feel only the general form* and, so to speak, the spirit of things, and that the elements which constitute these things elude our observation and our intelligence by their infinite complexity." *Vie littéraire*, I, 79. The italics are mine.

CONCLUSION

“O heavy lightness! Serious vanity!”

CONCLUSION

I HAVE ventured to suggest that France's classicism—about which I have been speaking at length because he is so freely and popularly known as the great classicist of modern times, the pure Greek—is only superficial. I have supported this suggestion by what confirmation I could muster. But there is one difference which finally and peremptorily separates, I think, Anatole France from the true classicists of Greece and Rome and France, from all the greatest writers of all times and all creeds: they are intellectually serious and he is not.

An eloquent page of Amiel is perhaps not inappropriate at this juncture:

9th December 1877.—The modern haunTERS of Parnassus carve urns of agate and of onyx, but inside the urns what is there?—ashes. Their work lacks feeling, seriousness, sincerity, and pathos—in a word, soul and moral life. I cannot bring myself to sympathise with such a way of understanding poetry. The talent shown is astonishing, but stuff and matter are wanting. It is an effort of the imagination to stand alone—a substitute for everything else. We find metaphors, rhymes, music, color, but not man, not humanity. Poetry of this factitious kind may beguile one at twenty, but what can one make of it at fifty? It reminds me of Pergamos, of Alexandria, of all the epochs of decadence when beauty of form hid poverty of thought and exhaustion of feeling. I strongly share the repugnance which this poetical school arouses in simple people. It is as though it only cared to please the world-worn, the over-subtle, the corrupted, while it ignores all normal healthy life, virtuous habits, pure affections, steady labor, honesty, and duty. It is an affectation, and because it is an affectation the

school is struck with sterility. The reader desires in the poet something better than a juggler in rhyme, or a conjurer in verse; he looks to find in him a painter of life, a being who thinks, loves, and has a conscience, who feels passion and repentance.¹

Not all of us will share the repugnance which Alexandrian excellence arouses in simple folk (the original reads *de braves gens*), and in Amiel. Amiel, it is to be remembered, is a Genevan. But one may not be a Genevan, or a Victorian, or even one of the *braves gens*, and still regret in an author his lack of real seriousness. I am aware that alongside the many readers who love Anatole France because they are sure he is never serious are as many more who love him because, despite all his protestations, they are convinced that he is always serious.

It is certain that France is serious in his attack on Christianity, or at least ascetic Christianity, and in his eulogy of the pursuit of pleasure, especially sensual pleasure; but that is as far as one can safely go. He seems to be serious when he expresses his contempt for mankind, since his novels bear out his assertion. But there is little evidence, aside from his bare declaration, that he is seriously overcome with pity for his fellows; at any rate with the pity which proceeds from sympathy, and nobody, surely, can take seriously the pity which proceeds from contempt. Burke declared rightly, and with becoming emphasis, that "the species of benevolence which arises from contempt is no true charity." There is in an attitude compounded of so many drams of contempt and so many drams of pity something too holier-than-thou for us readily to accept, Anatole France having taught us to look with suspicion upon those who pretend to superior wisdom or superior virtue—the unco wise and the unco good.

It is impossible to take his humanitarianism and his social-

¹ Mrs. Humphry Ward's translation.

ism very seriously, for he himself laughs them to scorn too effectively (his skeptical head making sport of his sentimental heart), not only in the *Rôtisserie* of his artistocratic days but even in the *Ile des Pingouins* and the *Dieux ont Soif* of his equalitarian period. I cannot help feeling that there is something fundamentally frivolous, or nonchalant, or indifferent (in any case not serious) about a man who delivers socialistic speeches by day and writes the two last-named novels by night.

He is serious, I think, in his devotion to beauty, but it is a beauty which is singularly narrow, a beauty, apparently, only of the senses, sensual and aesthetic. Of all kinds of human beauty other than the purely physical he seems unconscious, or derisive. He seems really seriously devoted, however, to beauty as he would define it, and yet he says without the appearance of joking: "Science has the right to exact of us an attentive, thoughtful mind. Art has not this right. It is by nature useless and charming." He would have us look upon art, including his own enchanting art, as a thing useless and charming, and nothing more.

France probably says what he means when he declares that we are not to take him seriously, that we are not to take anything seriously; he agrees with the large number of men and women who are of the opinion that nothing in the eternal flux of constantly shifting phenomena, except sensuous beauty, is to be taken very seriously. It is no wonder, therefore, that his thought is curious, startling, amusing, clear-eyed, and not easily deceived, rather than profound; that he assumes the manner of a dilettante, a spectator, an aesthete, a sensualist, an anarchist, a nihilist.

If it is true that nothing seems to him worthy of esteem except a sensuous beauty which may be tasted quickly, before the languorous or seething flux carries the prize away

in its endless motion, there is no need to seek further the unifying principle which may guide the reader to an understanding of his work, and explain the numerous inconsistencies scattered through it. That unifying principle is a negative one; it is lack of the quality which has been stamped deep upon the work of every truly great artist—seriousness. To show that I am not alone in making this negative principle the pivot of his work, I quote some passages from an essay by a contemporary critic, Mr. John Cowper Powys, one of France's ecstatic admirers:

"Anatole France has no gravity. He respects nothing; least of all himself. That is why there is something singularly winning about him which we miss in these others [Wilde, Pater, Stendhal, Gourmont, d'Annunzio]. . . . The glacial smile of the yawning gulf of eternal futility flickers through all his pages. Everything is amusing. Nothing is important. Let us eat and drink; let us be urbane and tolerant; let us walk on the sunny side of the road; let us smell the roses on the sepulchres of the dead gods; let us pluck the violets from the sepulchres of our dead loves; all is equal—nothing matters. . . .

"From the Olympian disenchantment of his tolerant urbanity, all eruptive seriousness foams back spray-tossed and scattered. And yet such a master of the art of 'suspended judgment' was he that he permits himself to dally very pleasantly with the most passionate illusions of the human race. He is too deep a sceptic even to remain at the point of taking seriously his own aesthetic epicureanism. . . . He is not really an aesthete at all; he is too Voltairean for that. . . .

"All the great civilised races tend to disillusion. Disillusion is the mark of civilised eras as opposed to barbaric ones, and if the dream of the poets is ever realised and the Golden Age returns, such an age will be the supreme age of happy, triumphant disillusion. . . . The real disillusioned spirit plays with illusions, puts them on and takes them off, lightly, gaily, indifferently, just as it happens, just as the moment demands. . . . We have become happy children of our own self-created kingdom of heaven; the kingdom of heaven which is the kingdom of disillusion.

"Anatole France fools sex without stint. It affords him, just as it did Voltaire and Rabelais, his finest opportunities. Fooling sex is the grand game of Anatole France's classic wit. The sport never wearies him. It seems an eternal perennial entertainment. Hardly one of his books but has this sexfooling as its principal theme. It seems to his detached and speculative mind the most amusing and irresistible jest in the world that men and women should behave as they do; that matters should be arranged in just this manner. . . ."

I am ready to revert to a statement which will have seemed surprising to many—a statement about France's style. I said that in reading him, while tasting eagerly the delights of an exquisite style, I yet was disturbed by an undercurrent of uneasy disquietude. I tried to explain this by analyzing certain deficiencies in the style itself which seemed apparent to me, and by calling attention to the unfortunate domination of his style by his manner; by adverting to an injudicious overestimation of style in comparison with structure; and by suggesting that style cannot be abstracted from thought. I have just been taking up again from the first Part of this book what seems to me a fatal defect in France's thought: his lack of seriousness; and I suspect that at bottom the primary source of the insufficiency of his style also is to be found precisely here. The fundamental lack of seriousness of his thought vitiates, to a certain extent, the very style itself. I might quote many an old critic, both classic and Romantic, to support my contention that something will be lacking to a writer's style (however perfect it might appear if it could be, as it cannot be, separated from his thought) if his thought is seriously deficient, but I prefer to seek aid and comfort in a critic who is contemporaneous and widely respected. Rémy de Gourmont says:

"A beautiful sentence is beautiful and a beautiful flower is beautiful; but their duration is about equal: a day, a century.

Nothing dies more quickly than the style that does not rest upon a solid foundation of vigorous thought. . . . Form without substance, style without thought,—what poverty! . . . The contrast between the supple, iridescent beauty of the robe and the skeleton body is touching, like a cemetery strewn with flowers. The value of the style is equal to the value of the thought. . . . If nothing in literature lives, except by virtue of its style, it is because works well thought out are always works well written. But the converse is not true: style alone is nothing. . . . The sign of the man in an intellectual work is the thought. The thought is the man. The style is the thought.”¹

If lack of seriousness is a striking characteristic of an author, “the value of his thought” cannot be great and “a solid foundation of vigorous thought” can hardly be expected of him. If form without substance, and style without thought, are poverty, my uneasiness while reading Anatole France, my feeling that something is wrong with his style, my inability to savor his melodies and colors without a qualm, seem substantiated. And, incidentally, if “nothing dies more quickly than the style that does not rest upon a solid foundation of vigorous thought,” Gourmont does not prophesy long life to France. If “thought is the man,” it may be added, one may suspect that the fluidity, the uncertainty, the lack of seriousness of France’s thought characterize the man also.²

¹ *Problème du Style*, 151–154.

² “In satire,” says Mr. Augustine Birrell, “character [that is, the character of the writer] tells more than in any other form of verse.”

I have refrained from quoting so fully as I might from M. Gsell, M. Le Goff, M. Brousson, M. Ségur, and from others who knew France intimately. It has been frequently said that the reputation of no man can survive the revelations of his private correspondence, or of his valet, or of his secretary. Johnson, however, is at his best in the hands of Boswell; and the wisdom of Goethe is nowhere more evident than in the pages of Eckermann. France has not been so well served as Johnson or Goethe. The portraits of his private life which I have read are devastating. They present the illustrious man as cold, selfish, insincere, and boundlessly egotistical; they show him at the end of his life still dominated by an indiscriminating and overpowering

The character of the author, his matter, his manner, and his style cannot be sundered. No style is satisfactory if the matter and manner of the work proclaim the writer as one who prides himself on his lack of seriousness. If Anatole France the thinker is frivolous or capricious or subtle rather than profound or serious, Anatole France the artist will in the last analysis be found to be compact of the same qualities; and the lustre of his intrinsically beautiful style will be tarnished and its charm very greatly diminished.

France's lack of conviction explains, too, the weakness of his grasp on life. His men and women do not live because, like him, they see nothing to live for, except passing sensual pleasure, which cloyes and disgusts and disenchants. They, like their creator, toy with life. They are bloodless manikins carrying on their aimless existence in an unreal world. They act little, and only when they are galvanized by the touch of the master's hand. They think and talk as mechanically as they move, driven by no inner vital impulse.

Where there is no conviction, seriousness, or purpose, fire and virile strength are lacking. And so is explained the effeminate indolence, the lack of drive, of forward movement, of intensity, the nonchalance and indifference of France, which set him apart from the really great writers and make of his works, not things vibrant with life, but collections of ingeniously-wrought gems. Having no convictions, France cannot simulate the serious interest in life which he does not possess. His works have no structure, for structure presupposes life and action. Structure is the framework of drama. Where there is no life, there is no drama, and no need of structure.

sensuality. This is bad enough; but it is depressing indeed to find that they render him ridiculous, a fate under which the memory of the great ironist will find it difficult to bear up.

I have confessed to a certain sense of fatigue as a result of the continuousness of France's irony, in season and out of season. Irony is the most artistic form which that monitor of society, the satirist, may use. But he must use it opportunely and discreetly, and he must use it with a purpose, and his purpose must be a worthy one. If, as I have said before, he uses it inopportunely, or with a purpose which cannot be approved, or if he persistently overshoots the mark, passing beyond the limits of exaggeration permitted to the satirist, our sympathy and not our scorn goes out to the victim, and the artist's aim is frustrated. Above all he must be serious. The ironist who, like France, spares no person and no thing, attacks good, bad, and indifferent, friend and foe, mocks at the whole world and all it contains, including himself and his works, all to no serious purpose, may be diverting, but he cannot be important.

In the hands of a real sage, satire is a beneficent weapon, and irony gives it its keenest edge. One quality is only less essential than seriousness and wisdom to the ironist—sympathy. Not the pity of Anatole France bred of detachment, or indifference, or contempt, but sympathy which betokens a recognition on the part of the ironist of his kinship with his victims. Let him first possess sympathy; then, when he has attained the high reaches of the Comic Spirit, which sees, understands, sympathizes,—and points the finger of accusing ridicule,—let him be as severe as he likes, let him scourge human follies as he will, let him be even savage. Though his indignation will carry him beyond the realm of humor, he will not find it in his heart to descend to sarcasm. With fine discrimination he will distinguish the true from the false; he will castigate the latter unsparingly, but with just measure and not in hatred or contempt; he will go to his task in all seriousness, and with confidence in the validity

of a conception of the true and the wise which he cherishes and is determined to defend. The great satirist denounces man and man's work because he is convinced that both might be made better than they are. Depicting the world as it is, he is spurred to write by a vision of the world as it might be. France is not such a satirist.

An irony which derides all in the name of nothing—how empty and futile, even though it were clever beyond any yet contrived by man. A style which is a thing of wonder, in the service of nothing that is serious, a beautiful, iridescent integument enfolding not life but the skeleton of life—what profligacy of genius!

Socrates says that Isocrates has a genius which “soars above the orations of Lysias” because “his character is cast in a finer mould. My impression of him is,” he continues, “that he will improve as he grows older, and that all former rhetoricians will be as children in comparison with him. And I believe that he will not be satisfied with rhetoric, but that there is in him a divine inspiration which will lead him to things higher still. For he has an element of philosophy in his nature.” The *Phaedrus*, from which these words are taken, ends with a prayer:

Socrates. Beloved Pan, and all ye other gods who haunt this place, give me beauty in the inward soul; and may the outward and inward man be at one. May I reckon the wise to be the wealthy, and may I have such a quantity of gold as a temperate man and he only can bear and carry.—Anything more? The prayer, I think, is enough for me.

Phaedrus. Ask the same for me, for friends should have all things in common.

Socrates. Let us go.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

I

A CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF THE WORKS OF ANATOLE FRANCE,
WITH ENGLISH TITLES WHERE TRANSLATIONS ARE AVAILABLE

1859. *La Légende de Sainte-Radegonde, Reine de France.*
1868. *Alfred de Vigny.*
1873. *Les Poèmes Dorés.* See 1896.
1876. *Les Noces Corinthiennes.* (*The Bride of Corinth.*)
See 1896.
1879. *Jocaste et Le Chat Maigre.* (*Jocasta and The Famished Cat.*)
Lucile de Chateaubriand.
1881. *Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard.* (*The Crime of Sylvestre Bonnard.*)
1882. *Les Désirs de Jean Servien.* (*The Aspirations of Jean Servien.*)
1884. *Abeille.* (*Honey Bee.*)
1885. *Le Livre de Mon Ami.* (*My Friend's Book.*)
1886. *Nos Enfants.* (*Our Children.*)
Filles et Garçons. (*Girls and Boys.*)
1888–1892. *La Vie Littéraire.* Four volumes. (*On Life and Letters.*)
1889. *Balthasar.* (*Balthasar.*)
1890. *Thaïs.* (*Thaïs.*)
1892. *L'Etui de Nacre.* (*Mother of Pearl.*)
1893. *La Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque.* (*At the Sign of the Reine Pédauque.*)
Les Opinions de Jérôme Coignard. (*The Opinions of Jerome Coignard.*)
1894. *Le Lys Rouge.* (*The Red Lily.*)

1895. Le Jardin d'Epicure. (The Garden of Epicurus.)
 Le Puits de Sainte-Claire. (The Well of St. Clare.)
1896. Poésies (containing the poetry published in 1873 and in 1876.)
1897. L'Orme du Mail. (The Elm Tree on the Mall.)
 Le Mannequin d'Osier. (The Wicker-work Woman.)
1899. L'Anneau d'Améthyste. (The Amethyst Ring.)
 Pierre Nozière. (Pierre Nozière.)
1900. Clio. (Clio.)
1901. Monsieur Bergeret à Paris. (Monsieur Bergeret in Paris.)
 Crainquebille. See 1904.
1902. Opinions Sociales.
1903. Histoire Comique. (A Mummer's Tale.)
1904. Crainquebille, Putois, Riquet, etc. (Crainquebille.)
 L'Eglise et la République.
1905. Sur la Pierre Blanche. (The White Stone.)
1906. Vers les Temps Meilleurs.
1908. L'Ile des Pingouins. (Penguin Island.)
 La Vie de Jeanne d'Arc. (The Life of Joan of Arc.)
 Les Contes de Jacques Tournebroche. (The Merrie Tales of Jacques Tournebroche.)
1909. Les Sept Femmes de la Barbe-Bleue. (The Seven Wives of Bluebeard.)
1910. Aux Etudiants.
1912. Les Dieux ont Soif. (The Gods are Athirst.)
1913. Le Génie Latin. (The Latin Genius.)
 La Comédie de celui qui épousa une femme muette. (The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife.)
1914. La Révolte des Anges. (The Revolt of the Angels.)
1915. Sur la Voie Glorieuse. (The Path of Glory.)
1916. Ce que disent nos Morts.
1918. Le Petit Pierre. (Little Pierre.)
1922. La Vie en Fleur. (The Bloom of Life.)
1925. Corday, *Dernières Pages inédites d'Anatole France.*
 (Under the Rose.)
 Girard, *La Jeunesse d'Anatole France.*

II

A LIST OF WORKS CONTAINING RECOLLECTIONS OF ANATOLE
FRANCE OR OF HIS CONVERSATION

Brousseau, *Anatole France en Pantoufles*. 1924.

(Anatole France Himself.)

Gsell, *Les Matinées de la Villa Saïd. Propos d'Anatole France*.
1921. (Opinions of Anatole France.)

Le Goff, *Anatole France à la Béchellerie*. 1924. (Anatole
France at Home.)

Roujon, *La Vie et les Opinions d'Anatole France*. 1925.

Ségur, *Conversations avec Anatole France, ou les Mélancholies de
l'Intelligence*. 1925. (Conversations with Anatole France.)

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